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Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*

A Critical Companion

Timothy S. Miller

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This book is dedicated to Nova, who still knows more about unicorns than I do.

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1. Beagle’s Early Career and a New Chapter in American Fantasy

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Abstract
This introductory chapter first traces the unusual trajectory of Beagle’s writing career from his early ambitions and associations in the mainstream literary world to his later establishment as a central figure in genre fantasy. It assesses the metafictional fantasy novel *The Last Unicorn* as simultaneously genre-bending and genre-defining due to its play with the conventions of fantasy at a time in fantasy’s history before those conventions had become so firmly established. The novel’s comic tone and unique position in fantasy’s history resulted in a mixed reception inside and outside the genre community, although it has now been enshrined as a classic of the genre.

Keywords Fantasy – Peter S. Beagle – Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series – *The Lord of the Rings*

Introduction: A Winding Path to Fantasy Fiction

Peter S. Beagle is one of the foundational figures in American fantasy, a key member of the first generation of young writers growing up on Tolkien, who set to work making the newly popular genre that sprang up in the wake of *The Lord of the Rings* their own. Beagle’s 1968 masterwork of fantasy *The Last Unicorn* has proved perennially popular across the many decades since its publication, and the novel’s 1982 animated film adaptation has also experienced multigenerational success.[1] *The Last Unicorn* first made Beagle’s name in the genre and no doubt continues to outsell his other

works, yet, over a long career that began when he was quite young, he has remained a steadily productive writer of shorter fiction and nonfiction while releasing several other novels at irregular intervals. Born in 1939 in New York City, Beagle began writing his first novel, *A Fine and Private Place* (1960), while still a teenager, and he commenced work on *The Last Unicorn* as early as 1962 at the age of 23, as documented in the reflections included with the publication of the novel's original draft as *The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* (2018). Beagle's debut novel, a kind of comedic ghost story, remains highly regarded, and his later work has also not gone unrecognized: he received the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award (for *The Folk of the Air* in 1987 and in 2000 for *Tamsin*); the Locus Award (for *The Innkeeper's Song* in 1994 and for the novelette "By Moonlight" in 2010); and in 2006 both a Hugo and a Nebula for a long-awaited sequel to *The Last Unicorn*, "Two Hearts." More recently, his lifetime contributions to the genre have earned him the distinction of both the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement in 2011 and the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award in 2018. Even so, the remarkable success and longevity of *The Last Unicorn* have led it to overshadow the numerous other works that form the author's considerable corpus, and Beagle himself chose to return to its narrative setting several times over the years in shorter-form works. The novel—which dramatizes a search for wonder and meaning against a backdrop of disenchanted modernity—arrived at a crucial time in the development of fantasy as a commercial product and left a lasting stamp on both the genre and the now-ubiquitous popular culture image of the unicorn: in some sense Beagle's "last" unicorn represents the first modern fantasy unicorn.

While today Beagle is a commanding presence in fantasy—in the past decade or so having lent his name and editorial work to a number of projects such as *The Secret History of Fantasy* (2010) and various unicorn-themed anthologies—at the beginning of his career it was far from apparent that his authorial destiny would lie in genre fiction at all. Unlike many writers of speculative fiction, Beagle's career did not begin with pulpy short story publications in dedicated genre magazines or specialized paperback lines. Although he never earned an MFA degree, with an undergraduate degree in creative writing from the University of Pittsburgh (1959) and the recipient of a prestigious Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford (1960–1961), Beagle was in fact a product of the earliest phase of American creative writing programs, notorious for their historical hostility to fantasy,

science fiction, and other forms of genre fiction.[2] The Stanford Creative Writing Program and its fellowships had only been established in 1946, at a time when Iowa had been the only institution offering a degree in the area, and Beagle's institutional tutelage as a creative writing student was only possible due to the postwar proliferation of creative writing programs, the impact of which on literary culture has been documented so extensively in Mark McGurl's 2011 monograph *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Literary luminary-to-be Ken Kesey belonged to Beagle's class of fellows at Stanford, and while there Beagle himself worked chiefly on a never-published realist novel *The Mirror Kingdom*, not to be confused with his firmly fantastical 2010 collection of stories *Mirror Kingdoms* (Zahorski 10–12). He recollects of his literary education at the time, "I read Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and Wolfe as I was supposed to do, and wrote my dutiful papers on Mailer and Styron" ("Back Then" 18). Fantasy, at the time, remained outside the academy.

Beagle did succeed in placing a piece of supernatural fiction written while in residence at Stanford in a mainstream literary outlet, despite having experienced program culture's antipathy toward genre firsthand, as described in Kenneth J. Zahorski's account of the composition of his story "Come Lady Death" while a student of Frank O'Connor at Stanford: "Beagle vowed to write a fantasy story O'Connor 'would have to accept'" (81).[3] O'Connor may not have much cared for it ("This is a beautifully written story[;] I don't like it"), but "Come Lady Death" was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1963 and even received a nomination for an O. Henry Award (81). Particularly at that time, the O. Henry Awards were associated with mainstream "literary" fiction, and, by way of illustration, the list of winners from 1964 to 1967 reads as a who's who among the literary community: John Cheever, Flannery O'Connor, John Updike, and Joyce Carol Oates. Three years later, however, Beagle's story received a reprint in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and, about three decades later, another reprinting in a Robert Silverberg anthology titled *The Fantasy Hall of Fame*, a publication history that neatly illustrates Beagle's embrace of and by the fantasy genre as his fiction's proper home.

Beagle has credited Frank O'Connor's dismissal of fantasy with having assisted in setting him "on an artistic path I'd truly never visualized as mine," and yet the trajectory of Beagle's career from the mainstream literary aspirations of the creative writing workshop to a comfortable

settling into genre fantasy in his later career was not a simple one (“Back Then” 18). His two early novels were reviewed by mainstream publications and treated as mainstream works; as he puts it himself in an interview with Leif Behmer, “there wasn’t nearly as much genrefication as there is now” (122). Unlike some other new authors of speculative fiction such as Andre Norton and Ursula K. Le Guin, Beagle did not spend the 1960s and 1970s writing for genre magazines, Ace Doubles, and other SF/F markets. Instead, he relied for income on a diverse nonfiction freelancing portfolio and, later, scripts for film and television, including the screenplay he penned for the 1974 biographical film *The Dove*, produced by Gregory Peck. His major writing project between *A Fine and Private Place* and *The Last Unicorn* was a nonfiction account of a cross-country motor scooter trip from New York to California, first serialized in the magazine *Holiday* in 1965 and subsequently published by Viking Press as *I See by My Outfit*. Even this idiosyncratic piece of travel writing, a whimsical window into 1960s America, contains hints of Beagle’s investments in the literature of the fantastic. Camping in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, not too distant from their point of origin in New York, Beagle compares his journey with his childhood friend Phil Sigunick to that of Tolkien’s hobbits setting out from the Shire: “It’s like *The Lord of the Rings*,” I say. *The Lord of the Rings* is a fantastic odyssey written by J. R. R. Tolkien, and it forms part of our private Gospels, along with *The Once and Future King*” (10). Tolkien thus provides Beagle with a framework to map his own cross-country trip, such that, for example, industrial Cleveland later evokes Mordor (18), an early hint of how bound up Beagle’s love for the fantastic and its evocation of preindustrial worlds would become with his environmentalism. Later works of nonfiction during this period include such varied endeavors as *The California Feeling*, a 1969 account of Beagle’s travels throughout the state, accompanied by the photographs taken by his collaborator Michael Bry; *American Denim: A New Folk Art*, a 1975 art book about a craft movement with Beagle’s commentary; and *The Lady and Her Tiger*, an animal rights advocacy book written with Hollywood animal trainer Pat Derby (1976). As with *I See by My Outfit*, we find in *The California Feeling* glimpses of countercultural milieus in which Beagle moved (even if mostly as observer), and also some fascinating perspectives on fantasy in the 1960s, connected again to an environmentalist impulse. Beagle expresses a love for most things Californian—describing the work as “a book by a New Yorker

who will never go back, but who remains a New Yorker in a curious, grumpy way that keeps him from taking the fact of being here too much for granted" (11)—with the important exception of "that lime pit of the imagination," Disneyland (215). Beagle attributes his "passionately sincere hatred for Walt Disney"—"the endless Enemy of everybody who ever made up a story"—in part to a fury about "what he did to T. H. White's masterpiece, *The Sword in the Stone*" (215). More telling are his vituperations about Disneyland's glorification of simulacra during a time of increasing ecological crisis: "As redwood trees and lions and blue whales become extinct, their incredibly detailed and lifelike replicas will appear in Disney's pale kingdom, and nowhere else" (216). Even in as unlikely a venue as *American Denim*, Beagle reminds us of the countercultural obsession with Tolkien, and connects contemporary arts and crafts movements with the longing for premodern lifeways so common in fantasy: "What has been coming back with crafts is an attitude which holds that it is all right for human beings not to be machines, and that the imperfect work of a single human being's hands is of value, whether it keeps the rain off or not, whether it sells or not" (13).[4] Beagle's mind, it is clear, was never far from the Shire, and, in an introductory headnote first included with editions of *The Lord of the Rings* around the same time in 1973, he specifically praises Tolkien's fantasy worldbuilding as providing "a green alternative to each day's madness here in a poisoned world" (3).

As we have seen, Beagle was not entirely disconnected from the world of fantastic fiction during this period of "commercial writing" in his career, in fact writing the screenplay for Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version of *The Lord of the Rings*, yet a gap of almost two decades would lapse between the first publication of *The Last Unicorn* and that of his next long fictional work of any kind, *The Folk of the Air* (1986). Set in a fictionalized version of Berkeley named Avicenna, this novel does not take the form of a secondary-world fantasy, but remains much more grounded in realism, and not coincidentally was published in the same year as a watershed text heralding the coming urban fantasy explosion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mark Alan Arnold and Terri Windling's *Borderland* anthology.[5] *The Folk of the Air* initiated a new movement in Beagle's career, a mounting momentum toward genre fantasy, a field in which his output would grow enormously over the next several decades, including the novels *The Innkeeper's Song* (1993), *The Unicorn Sonata* (1996), *Tamsin* (1999), and

Summerlong (2016), as well as a number of short story collections and novellas. Chapter 5 will return to this period in his career, which toward its latter end included multiple revisitations of the world of *The Last Unicorn* by an author who once disclaimed, "I don't write sequels" (*Giant Bones* ix).

Briefly looking back toward Beagle's first novel *A Fine and Private Place* will better contextualize *The Last Unicorn* in its own time, and indeed the same publisher of mainstream literary fiction, Viking Press, brought out Beagle's first three very different books, this proto-urban fantasy set in a New York City cemetery, the Beat-adjacent travelogue *I See by My Outfit*, and the metafantasy that is *The Last Unicorn*.[6] Like *The Last Unicorn*, *A Fine and Private Place* embeds a number of literary allusions in the dialogue of numerous characters, most regularly referencing Shakespeare and other high canonical authors of English literature. Sometimes a single page will contain more than one quotation or paraphrased line of verse from a writer enshrined in the old Norton Anthology of English Literature; even a particularly literate squirrel drops a reference and muses on poetry (85). One of the essential elements of the novel's fantastical worldbuilding, a conception of death as forgetfulness—its ghosts eventually forget living, forget themselves—also anticipates the association between oblivion and the antagonistic figure of the Red Bull developed more dramatically in *The Last Unicorn*. Further, Zahorski finds this unusual and perhaps unusually light ghost story "more Thurberesque than Lovecraftian" despite its graveyard setting (26), and the novel itself mentions James Thurber by name (104), a major influence on Beagle's dry and often absurdist humor in *The Last Unicorn* (along with T. H. White). Zahorski also cites an unpublished memo from Beagle's hands-on editor at Viking, Marshall Best, complaining that *A Fine and Private Place* "was written in 'two entirely different tones or conventions of fiction'—fantasy and psychological realism" (21). Throughout his career, Beagle would receive both praise and criticism for such minglings of modes and tones. For instance, a dozen years after the publication of *The Last Unicorn*, Brian Attebery's first monograph, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, celebrates the kind of "low-key satire" to be found in his earlier "funny, offbeat ghost story" (158), but ultimately judges *The Last Unicorn* unsuccessful in bridging such a comedic tone and that which he deems appropriate to Tolkienian high fantasy, viewing Schmendrick as "indulg[ing] in anachronisms at the expense of the story" (159). As we will

see, likely in part due to Beagle's position as a comparative outsider with respect to genre fiction communities and more proximate to mainstream literary communities, there are many such counterintuitive assessments and complexities to be found in both the scholarly and popular reception history of *The Last Unicorn*, especially early on. But the tremendous impression that the novel left on the genre in its own time and long after cannot be denied.

The Last Unicorn and the Fantasy Form in 1968 and Beyond

As an early comic metafantasy that seems to anticipate much of the history of mass-market fantasy to come, *The Last Unicorn* occupies a unique position as at once genre-bending and genre-defining. Fantasy, of course, existed long before 1968, but the late 1960s marked a new era of growth and cohesion for the field, characterized by a more unified shared conception of the genre and indeed more organized marketing strategies from publishers. Both *The Last Unicorn* and another major fantasy published the same year, Ursula K. Le Guin's novel for young people *A Wizard of Earthsea*, were first published by mainstream presses (Viking Press and the small Berkeley publisher Parnassus Press, which had previously published Le Guin's mother's book *Ishi, Last of His Tribe*), but then quickly snapped up and reprinted extensively by publishers specializing in the newly lucrative market for genre fiction paperbacks (by Ballantine Books and Ace Books, respectively). The graphic design of the Viking cover appears very understated in comparison with the characteristically garish covers of genre science fiction and fantasy of the time, with no images at all and only some stylization in the lettering; to my knowledge, this is in fact the only cover that the book ever received which does not depict a unicorn. By the time of its first UK printing by the Bodley Head later in 1968, the novel had acquired the now-standard image of a unicorn on the cover and a subtitle for that market, "A Fantastic Tale." When Beagle's novel was acquired by Ballantine Books, it was first printed in early 1969 with the words "A Ballantine Adult Fantasy" on the front cover, and in fact immediately preceded the launch of the groundbreaking Ballantine Adult Fantasy line later in the year, a series which far from

coincidentally adopted the unicorn's head as the new universal emblem for genre fantasy. Unicorns had appeared in fantasy novels before, but, in the wake of Beagle's novel, the unicorn had come to stand for fantasy.

In some sense, then, *The Last Unicorn* was truly the first Ballantine adult fantasy and lent its central image of the unicorn to fantasy's early self-definition, although the novel was not included in the series proper and did not bear its own unicorn colophon on the cover for a few more years. In their *Short History of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James explain that the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, "by reprinting many of the classics of fantasy […], helped to establish the idea of fantasy as a genre in the minds of the reading public" (76), and Brian Attebery frames it more bluntly as the moment when "[f]antasy became a commercial category" and "[t]he market for fantasy was born" (*Stories about Stories* 97). In other words, *The Last Unicorn* emerged into the world at the very same time that genre fantasy as a publishing category of works imitative of Tolkien came into being—indeed helped it come into being—and yet Mendlesohn and James argue that Beagle's novel nevertheless "might be seen as the first of an emerging counter-narrative to the oncoming Tolkien tsunami, because it was already questioning the assumptions behind the quest narrative" (90). Fittingly, rather than the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, Beagle himself prefers to point to the publication in 1977 of Terry Brooks's close Tolkien imitation *The Sword of Shannara* as the moment that signaled the complete "genrefication" of fantasy, as he terms it (Behmer 122). Chapter 2 will pursue at greater length how Beagle's novel might be understood as alternatively Tolkienian and non-Tolkienian in nature and aesthetic: certainly, it is a Tolkienian fantasy of a different sort than the many secondary-world sagas that would follow in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond.

The Last Unicorn sold well and saw many reprintings shortly after its initial publication, although we could certainly describe the range of critical responses to it as mixed, even divided, in that opinion from fantasy writers and critics in reviews for the genre magazines of the time runs the full spectrum from faint praise to appeals for instantaneous canonization. For instance, writing at the radical edge of SF/F in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds*, M. John Harrison, soon to become a fantasist of some stature himself, understands the novel as "fantasy in a more traditional mode" (61), and, while admiring the quest plot, continues in his capsule review that "Beagle tries to turn the book into something other than a simple romance

by adding uncomfortable parodies of things modern: the result is roughly textured, self-conscious and larded with a coy whimsy" (62). Gahan Wilson's quick review in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* is also roundly negative (98). By contrast, influential science fiction critic Alexei Panshin appraises the novel highly in his review for *Fantastic*, while also including "one quibble" about those same anachronisms to which Attebery objects: "Beagle's story is solid enough to stand, but some of his anachronisms are momentarily jarring" (144). More glowingly still, veteran SF author John Brunner in *Vector* declares *The Last Unicorn* "delightful" (19), and Spider Robinson's later review in *Galaxy* even extols it as "the finest fantasy I've ever read, just plain one of the finest books I've ever read" (130). Irrespective of this mixed early reception, over the past several decades *The Last Unicorn* has remained a reliable candidate to earn a place on various lists lauding the best fantasy novels ever written. By way of illustration, the novel appears in *Time*'s 2020 canon of "The 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time" despite that list's more contemporary slant (McCluskey); David Pringle's unranked list in his 1988 book *Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels*; Nick Rennison and Stephen E. Andrews's 2009 Bloomsbury guide *100 Must-read Fantasy Novels*; NPR's 2011 crowdsourced compilation of best science fiction and fantasy novels (Neal); and quite highly in *Locus* rankings from 1987 and 1998 that were based on readers' choices for best fantasy novels of all time (placing 5th and 18th, respectively; see "Locus Poll"). Finally, in their own *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski, and Robert H. Boyer insist that, "If there were a 'ten best' list of modern fantasy, *The Last Unicorn* would certainly be on it" (51). Of course, the novel's enduring popularity has meant that adaptations have multiplied across a variety of media, as Chap. 5 will cover comprehensively.

Beagle's novel also happened to be published only a few years before the academic study of fantasy began to gain increasing institutional momentum in the 1970s and early 1980s, and holds a distinctive place in the history of fantasy studies as well. A considerable fraction of the existing scholarship on the book dates to the first decade or so after its publication, including multiple presentations from some of the first meetings of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts published in conference proceedings volumes, and several pieces in the oldest journal

dedicated to science fiction and fantasy, *Extrapolation*. Jane Mobley, for one, turned to the novel for examples to illustrate her formal definition of fantasy in an early article for *Extrapolation*. Preliminary assessments from some other prominent names in the new field of fantasy studies, however, proved lukewarm. As mentioned above, Attebery's first book (1980) unfavorably discusses Beagle's use of anachronism and humor, and Colin Manlove's milestone 1983 monograph *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* discusses the novel in a chapter titled "Anaemic Fantasy," which ends with a damning judgment on the authors covered in it: "It is unfortunate for the literary standing of fantasy that the kind of work produced by these writers should so often be taken as characteristic of the genre" (154). Manlove harshly criticizes Beagle's novel as "a fantasy in search of a story" (148) in which "the author is trying to say too many things" (150); because "[m]ost of the book is not powerfully felt or presented" (150), it becomes "the product of inaccurate feeling and falls into excess" (154). As early as the 1970s, however, other scholars working outside of science fiction and fantasy studies proper were already finding Beagle worthy of attention, perhaps reaffirming the wide acceptance of Beagle's work as a more mainstream novel at the time (see, for example, the early articles by David Van Becker, Don Parry Norford, and David Stevens, although the latter was published in *Extrapolation*).

It is noteworthy that Manlove concludes his chapter on "Anaemic Fantasy" by expressing a concern that Beagle will drag down the reputation of fantasy within the broader literary community, when in fact the novel's initial reception in the mainstream literary world would seem far more favorable than the perhaps unexpectedly tepid response by these two key pioneering scholars of genre fantasy. Indeed, Raymond M. Olderman's 1972 Yale University Press study *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-sixties* features a downright encomiastic final chapter dedicated to Beagle, having covered in the chapters that precede it authors of a high literary pedigree that Beagle is today far less commonly associated with than at this early point in his career, including his fellow student at Stanford Ken Kesey, John Barth, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon. Desirous to claim Beagle as belonging to a wider postmodern generation of American writers, Olderman uses the word "fable" rather than "fantasy" to label the genre to which *The Last Unicorn* belongs, speaking of Beagle in same breath as Kurt Vonnegut as two

“fabulists” he counts “among the best writers of the sixties” (187). Not fantasy writers, but simply writers: Olderman compares Beagle not to Tolkien or other fantasists but rather to mainstream writers of the 1960s, Shakespeare, and Virginia Woolf, and his appreciations depart from Manlove’s later assessments at every turn. In Olderman’s view, Beagle has produced a “marvelous fable” that is “extraordinarily credible,” and “a culmination of what the fable form contributes to the novelist’s vision of the sixties” (220). The novel was also reviewed favorably in many prestigious mainstream venues, including *The New York Times Book Review* (Kiely), with such critics as Harold Jaffe describing it in *Commonweal* as “an exquisite little fable” (447), and Granville Hicks in *Saturday Review* commending Beagle’s “extraordinary inventive powers” (22).[7] The positive reception of Viking Press’s *The Last Unicorn* by mainstream “highbrow” literary critics and its sometimes less positive reception in genre communities complicate Attebery’s assertion that in the late 1960s and 1970s “the academic world was not ready to accept nonrealistic genres as potentially equal to the kinds of fiction for which its critical and pedagogical tools were adapted” (*Stories about Stories* 97). Of course, after Beagle’s slow career transformation into a writer famous for his genre fantasy, new generations of fantasists would come to claim *The Last Unicorn* as their own, fantasy novelist Patrick Rothfuss, for example, firmly pronouncing, “*The Last Unicorn* is my favorite book” and recognizing it as “one of the cornerstones of fantasy literature (*The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* i). Beagle himself has explained that he “didn’t set out to be, quote, ‘a fantasy writer’” (Behmer 122), but fantasy is where he landed and indeed a form he helped to shape.

If the prominence of *The Last Unicorn* on Ballantine’s roster cemented the association between unicorns and the fantastic, Beagle’s novel has also done much to solidify the now ubiquitous popular culture image of the unicorn and its nature. Unicorns had made sporadic and sometimes fleeting appearances in fantastic literature before the 1960s, as in Lord Dunsany’s *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (1924); Fletcher Pratt’s novel *The Well of the Unicorn* (1948); Theodore Sturgeon’s short story “The Silken-Swift,” which suggested the title for the collection in which it appeared, *E Pluribus Unicorn* (1953); and memorably in a singularly disturbing episode from the second book of T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* (1939, collected 1958), among others. But in the 1960s the unicorn finally came into its

own, and—in part thanks to Beagle—every decade since has also been a decade of unicorns.[8] Chapter 3 will address the many mythologies and other backgrounds on which Beagle draws to create the unique fabric of his metafantasy, chief among them unicorn lore. Beagle's decision to gender the unicorn female likely played a major role in the gradual feminization of the unicorn's image over the next two decades. Beagle has framed this element of her character as foundational though unconscious on his part—"She was always female from the first sentence; I didn't think about it one way or the other" (Behmer 120)—but the transformation of what was, pre-1968, typically a symbol of untamable masculine virility into Beagle's femininized version of the unicorn enabled the proliferation of such unicorns in, for example, the My Little Pony franchise and Lisa Frank's rainbow designs.[9] For a narrative to take the point of view of the unicorn has also become a commonplace today, but represents a shift away from the fundamentally feral and unknowable unicorn of the past. Finally, in her mock-encyclopedic *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, Diana Wynne Jones documents—and sends up—Beagle's profound influence on subsequent conjurers of unicorns across fantasy fiction: "**UNICORNS** are exceedingly rare. Each one you meet will tell you that it is the last one" (212). On some level, all later fantasy unicorns look back to Beagle's.

We have seen in this chapter that, even if Beagle's unicorn had arguably become the face of fantasy thanks to the unicorn emblem advertising a new canon of fantasy in the form of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, at this stage in his career he himself had not yet become pigeonholed as fantasy writer. Even so, Beagle was always an advocate and champion of fantasy, an important early booster for Tolkien and, like W. H. Auden, defender of his literary credibility to a wider audience in such venues as *Holiday* magazine, the first place of publication for his 1966 essay "Tolkien's Magic Ring," later republished in Ballantine's *The Tolkien Reader*. In his book on Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Beagle self-describes as "a modern, skeptical, secular Jew," musing about why premodern Christian visions of the afterlife should speak to him so much (10), and we might well wonder what affinities this young American mover in countercultural spaces should have with a conservative English Catholic of an earlier generation. The next chapter will use Tolkien as such a close point of comparison for a preliminary reading of *The Last Unicorn* because of the convergences—and important divergences—that we can observe

between the two authors in terms of both their respective themes and broader theories of fantasy as a form.

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Footnotes

1 Writing for *The New York Times* in 2022, Elizabeth A. Harris affirms the novel's continued popularity well into the twenty-first century: "Ben Lee, an associate publisher for paperbacks and backlist at Berkley, said the book consistently sells 15,000 to 20,000 a year—sales that would be a strong showing for a new book, one that debuted with a marketing budget behind it. In 50 years, *The Last Unicorn* has never been out of print" (Harris).

2 In at least some creative writing programs in this century, that hostility toward SF/F has begun to erode, such that highly respected MFA programs such as the one at Sarah Lawrence College can even feature a degree concentration in speculative fiction; Emerson College likewise offers an MFA in "Popular Fiction Writing" that emphasizes genre fiction.

3 Zahorski's Starmont Reader's Guide from 1988 remains the best source for Beagle's early biography, as it relies on extensive personal interviews with Beagle and several members of his family. For a brief biographical sketch that fills in some further details from Beagle's later life and career, see also Dennis Wilson Wise's 2019 entry on the author for *The Literary Encyclopedia*, especially the section titled "Late Life Troubles and Beagle's Literary Renaissance."

4 Later in *American Denim*, Beagle points to Tolkien as a direct aesthetic influence on an exhibition of hand-decorated denims: "[T]he dominant voice is that of J. R. R. Tolkien—the Tolkien of his own illustrations and most particularly the original cover of *The Hobbit*, with its jagged bands of mountains and its cold sky. Even when he is not obviously present in subject or style, you can feel

him in the colors, in the greens and the blacks, and in the forested spirit—joyous, but always with the slightest shade of foreboding—of the embroidered worlds. Tolkien is part of the air of this time, too" (134).

5 For a consideration of *The Folk of the Air* in the context of this wider movement in the genre toward urban fantasy, see Kelso, "*Loces Genii*." "Lila the Werewolf," Beagle's early tale of a werewolf in Manhattan, begins with the matter-of-fact opening, "Lila Braun had been living with Farrell for three weeks before he found out she was a werewolf" (155), and could also be understood as an urban fantasy *avant la lettre*. Beagle has elsewhere written that "[t]he true wild country of my childhood was Van Cortlandt Park" ("Good-bye" 96), and his story "The Rock in the Park" emphasizes how a fantastical world can be found within this big city park: "It was all of Sherwood to me and my friends, that forest" (*Mirror Kingdoms* 394). Some migrating centaurs show up, and so Weronika Łaszkiewicz has identified a favorite narrative pattern of Beagle's in his later unicorn stories, a pattern in which "the lives of ordinary people are disrupted by the sudden appearance of a mythic creature that requires some form of human help" ("The Unicorn as the Embodiment" 51). "The Rock in the Park," "Oakland Dragon Blues," and other short stories share this same plot.

6 For comparative purposes, other Viking titles of the time included Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and major novels by Nobel laureates John Steinbeck and Saul Bellow, in addition to American editions of works by authors such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence. Between the publication of *A Fine and Private Place* and *The Last Unicorn*, Viking released both Steinbeck's final novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and Bellow's National Book Award-winning novel *Herzog* (1964). Beagle's first agent Elizabeth Otis also worked with Steinbeck, and her agency came to boast a highly impressive roster.

7 The back cover of Beagle's most recent release to date, 2023's *The Way Home*, still carries a line from the 1968 Kiely review in *The New York Times Book Review*: "Beagle has the opulence of imagination and the mastery of style."

8 On the evolution of the unicorn into and beyond an image for fantasy, see Miller, "The Unicorn Trade."

9 Beagle has made a point of the unicorn always having been female since at least 1978; see Tobin, "Werewolves," 1884.

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2. Death and the Desire for Deathlessness: Beagle and J. R. R. Tolkien on Fantasy and Mortality

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Abstract
Although an early promoter of J. R. R. Tolkien's works, Beagle would come to downplay the influence of Tolkienian secondary-world fantasy on his own writing. This chapter closely analyzes the relationship between the works of Tolkien and Beagle primarily in light of concepts put forth in the former author's theory of the fantasy form. Beagle's greatest debts to Tolkien lie not in any formal imitations, but rather in similar thematic concerns and jointly shared perspectives on the higher functions of fantasy. The many symbolic associations of the Red Bull can, for example, be understood within this framework as reflecting a fear of oblivion and meaninglessness, against which fantasy's strategies of meaning-making and reenchantment can act positively.

Keywords Fantasy – J. R. R. Tolkien – *The Lord of the Rings* – Eucatastrophe – Immortality – Reenchantment

The Ring and the Unicorn: Escape, Consolation, and Other Tolkienian Impulses

In his introduction to *The Secret History of Fantasy*, Beagle recalls binge-reading *The Lord of the Rings* in 1958 while still a teenage college student, after having tracked down a copy at the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh not long after the publication of the final installment, and before the book had become a cultural icon or even widely available in the US (10). Naturally, even the early Viking Press dust jacket for *The Last Unicorn* makes the obligatory comparison to Tolkien that has appeared in so much fantasy marketing copy since, and Tolkien's influence on Beagle cannot be understated (although it can be misunderstood).[1] It is true Beagle himself has often tried to do just that: when speaking of the literary influences on his fantasy in interviews and his assorted nonfiction, Beagle mentions T. H. White and Lord Dunsany as often as Tolkien—or more often than Tolkien—and typically also alongside other authors such as James Thurber, James Stephens, and chiefly Robert Nathan, of whom Beagle has said, "I owe him more, as a writer, than I owe anyone else" ("Foreword to *Evening Song*" 11).[2] Nevertheless, as foundational fantasists Beagle and Tolkien remain inextricable. Apart from any influence from Tolkien on his work, Beagle has himself shaped Tolkien's own reception and legacy, notably through his screenplay for the 1978 film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and the essay "Tolkien's Magic Ring," which has effectively entered the Tolkien canon due to its inclusion in the frequently reprinted *Tolkien Reader* alongside so many of Tolkien's important shorter works, including that essential document in the history of fantasy theory, "On Fairy-stories" itself. This chapter is less concerned with compiling evidence of Tolkien's direct literary influence on Beagle and more with tracing some of the perspectives and themes that the two authors share. The nature of Tolkien's influence on Beagle is indeed complex and nonobvious, and differs enormously from the more formalistic ways that Tolkien influenced much secondary-world fantasy—for example, *A Wizard of Earthsea* or *The Sword of Shannara*—a genre that characteristically avoids the metafictional impulses running wild in *The Last Unicorn*. We can observe a perhaps counterintuitive convergence of the two authors' implicit theories of fantasy as a narrative form, even though Beagle eschews many of Tolkien's

narrative strategies. With its own thematic emphasis on mortality and immortality, *The Last Unicorn* does develop the earlier author's self-declared themes in new directions; in a 1957 letter, Tolkien centers death and the human desire to escape it in *The Lord of the Rings*: "I should say, if asked, the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness" (GoodKnight 19).[3] Precisely what Tolkien and Beagle have in common can best be expressed through recourse to ideas that Tolkien articulates in "On Fairy-stories," namely "Recovery, Escape, and Consolation," concepts all linked in the works of the two authors by their contemplation of mortality and, balanced against death, the power of imaginative art (66).

Writing in one of the earliest books of criticism dedicated to fantasy, Lin Carter counts *The Last Unicorn* among only three first-rate fantasies he has read since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and yet tries to distinguish Beagle's novel as *sui generis*: "[F]rom the evidence of that narrative, one cannot even discern whether Mr. Beagle had ever so much as dipped into the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*" (160). Dennis Wise similarly emphasizes the extent to which "*The Last Unicorn* participates in a postmodern literary landscape, wholly alien to Tolkien's work, then sweeping American mainstream fiction" ("*The Last Unicorn*"). And Beagle, in the foreword to Noble Smith's *The Wisdom of the Shire*, likewise identifies himself as "one whose own work is frequently—and erroneously—bracketed with" Tolkien's (ix–x). In his foreword to *Giant Bones*, the story collection that revisits the secondary world incarnated in *The Innkeeper's Song*, Beagle frames his own aversion to writing sequels as a reaction against the expansiveness of Tolkienian fantasy: "[I]t honestly never occurred to me to ape Tolkien. There didn't seem to be much point to it" (ix). In an earlier interview, Beagle concedes the influence of Tolkien even while continuing to downplay it: "I felt *The Last Unicorn* was completely free of his influence, and then I realized much later that, of course, he's there. […] T. H. White is a much better writer and means much more to me" (Tooker and Hofheins 9). Such attempts to distance himself from Tolkien may stem in part from modesty and in part from a justifiable desire to clarify the many literary tributaries of his own work, and certainly do not arise from the same kind of ambition to distinguish his aesthetics or politics from Tolkien's that motivated the young China Miéville to attack Tolkien as "the wen on the arse of fantasy literature" ("With One Bound").

Many more authors than Tolkien shaped *The Last Unicorn*, but his imprint remains indelible.

If we search for themes and motifs detectible in both *The Last Unicorn* and *The Lord of the Rings*, death and desire dominate. On the formal rather than thematic level, though, the single major feature of his novel that Beagle ascribes to Tolkien's influence is the prominent inclusion of poetry and song within the prose narrative:

> Tolkien did not affect me the way that most people think he did. I'm very often compared to him and C. S. Lewis. I'm stuck with those 2. In fact, while I admire Tolkien in many ways, I don't find him in my work, except for the fact that I loved his notion of including song and verse in *The Lord of the Rings*, naturally. His people fell back on either well-known songs or made them up as they were going along. And I was definitely imitating that in *The Last Unicorn*. (Greenland 295)

In his essay, "Tolkien's Magic Ring," Beagle, a sometime-professional musician himself, writes of *The Lord of the Rings* that "[t]he book is full of singing" (xv), and both novels of course deploy such verse interludes in service of reflections on storytelling, memory, and art: the books include song and poetry partly in order to thematize song and poetry. Beagle's encomium of an essay speaks to a closer identification with *The Lord of the Rings* and its author than his later disclaimers might lead us to assume:

> I have read the complete work five or six times (not counting browsing, for which this essay is, in part, an excuse), and each time my pleasure in the texture of it deepens. It will bear the mind's handling, and it is a book that acquires an individual patina in each mind that takes it up, like a much-caressed pocket stone or piece of wood. At times, always knowing that I didn't write it, I feel that I did. (xii)

Beagle can feel as if he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* because, for all that distinguishes the authors, some fundamental perspectives on storytelling undergird his work and Tolkien's. To death and desire we might well add a common interest in reflecting on the power of story, poetry, and fantasy, which Beagle explores largely via metafiction and Tolkien more in his other

works, especially “Tree and Leaf,” the title in *The Tolkien Reader* given to the pairing of the essay “On Fairy-stories” and his allegory of the writer “Leaf by Niggle.” Of course, even Sam Gamgee proffers a metafictional moment in *The Two Towers*, sounding just a little like Schmendrick: “I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards” (321).

In his own contribution to *The Tolkien Reader*, “Tolkien’s Magic Ring,” Beagle pinpoints “history, chance and desire” as the forces that shape lives of Middle-earth’s inhabitants (x), and highlights Gollum in particular as “a single, glowing cinder of meaningless desire” (xiii). Powerful desires drive many of the characters in *The Last Unicorn*, but the one that most resembles Gollum in this respect is surely King Haggard with his inexplicable desire for unicorns that can never be satisfied even by their possession. At first Gollum and Haggard may not seem counterparts in any way because they occupy opposite stations in the world, and they certainly differ in the refinement of their speech and intellect. Yet Beagle finds Gollum so haunting because he was “already a ghost when the story began,” a remark that might be made of the aged Haggard as well (xiv): just as Haggard stalks the streets of Hagsgate thieving trinkets to fill an unfillable hole, Gollum skulks in the hope of retrieving the Ring that can only torment him. The abstemious, threadbare Haggard, “gray as driftwood, prowling alone” (125)—whose nature is tied to his “bony kingdom” (115) and a castle with “skinny spires” (150)—is more Gollum than Sauron, an evil king, yes, but no dark lord.[4] We are told that Haggard tried playing at being a Sauron, but did not much care for it: “That was back in the days when he was being wicked to see if that was what he really liked to do. It wasn’t” (229). Haggard represents a state of mind more than acting as a dread lord, serving a role as negative exemplum as does Gollum, laid low by the Ring; just so, Raymond Olderman proposes Haggard as “tentatively suggested everyman,” rather than Schmendrick, Molly, or Lír, “not so much the man to be beaten as the wound to be healed in all of us” (229). Lending some support to this reading of Haggard as everyman rather than antagonist alone, Beagle, when asked which of his characters he most identifies himself with, once self-deprecatingly answered, “that damn butterfly from *The Last Unicorn*” and “Schmendrick, after a fashion,” but Haggard, too: “Schmendrick was a bedtime character, whose adventures I used to tell my

daughters. […] [T]here's a lot of me in him, certainly. So there is in Haggard, for that matter" (Broughton 149). Rabanus Mitterecker also presents an extended reading of Haggard's character as "a tragic figure desperately longing for happiness" who "can be seen as an allegory of the capitalist spirit present in contemporary Western societies" (165–166). Haggard also has a precedent in Lady Neville, the central character of Beagle's earlier story "Come Lady Death," whose own anhedonia leads her to invite Death over to liven up her parties: "There is no one quite so weary of being human, no one who knows better how meaningless it is to be alive" (*Mirror Kingdoms* 60). We could say that Beagle has a penchant for wretched characters, as he names Judge Jefferies from his novel *Tamsin* as "the first villain I've never felt sorry for": "From King Haggard on I've always had a nagging tendency to identify with my villains, and I've never done one for whom I didn't feel some human sympathy" (Greenland 291). It is no wonder that Gollum moves him with a special power.

In terms of their religious backgrounds, their politics, and any manner of other personal proclivities and orientations toward the world, Tolkien and Beagle no doubt differ immensely, yet it is significant that Beagle perceives in Tolkien's fantasy a kindred ecological vision, as I suggested briefly in the previous chapter when alluding to the headnote that Beagle contributed to *The Lord of the Rings*. Susan Palwick, too, has written that "the abiding concern with landscape" in much high fantasy seems "less escapist than ecological," and finds the *The Last Unicorn* itself "fundamentally concerned with the restoration of ecological balance" ("Human Enough to Cry" 15). Of course, Fisher King imagery and quests to restore a wounded land originate in premodern and preindustrial imaginaries and thus do not themselves signal an engagement with contemporary ecological or environmentalist understandings or concerns. Importantly, however, Beagle speaks in that 1973 *Lord of the Rings* headnote in very specific terms, pinpointing the 1960s as "the years when millions of people grew aware that industrial society had become paradoxically unlivable, incalculably immoral, and ultimately deadly" (3). In his introduction to the book *In the Ocean Wind: The Santa Cruz North Coast*, composed around the same date, we likely find Beagle's most forceful—if also quite grim—articulation of an environmentalist conscience: "Frankly, I don't think we're going to make it. Not in any way that matters" (13). Beagle here sounds several deeply pessimistic notes—"we will do everything to clean up our air but

surrender the internal-combustion engine" (13)—and attacks conventional notions of progress: "We have confused noise with accomplishment one more time" (14). The brief polemic culminates in a call to non-Anthropocentric thinking: "When you were little you believed that everything had feelings. Nothing less than that is worth believing now" (15). If Beagle—or Tolkien—can be said to have a consistent politics in his writing, it would seem to be an ecological one. In two reference entries on Beagle, Dennis Wise deems Beagle's fiction "relatively apolitical" ("*The Last Unicorn*"), demonstrating a "relative disinterest in politics or social critique, at least in his fiction—a notable absence, arguably, for a writer whose family was left-leaning and who, as a young man, happily followed the Countercultural lifestyle of the 1960s" ("Peter S. Beagle").[5] When Prince Lír tells Schmendrick dismissively, "You have no power over anything that matters" and "Wizards make no difference, so they say that nothing does" (248, 264), we might detect an echo of W. H. Auden's phrase "poetry makes nothing happen" from the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," but the return of spring to Haggard's country may hold greater significance as an image of social and/or political renewal through the restorative, "magical" power of art.

We can also find a number of echoes of Tolkien both verbal and philosophical in *The Last Unicorn*. For one example, in contrast to Schmendrick's sheer incompetence, Mommy Fortuna's brand of magic instead remains circumscribed by her wickedness: "'She cannot make things.' 'Nor truly change them,' added the magician" (27). This idea closely recapitulates Tolkien's conception of evil and its incapacity for creation, as formulated, for example, by Frodo in *The Return of the King*: "The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them" (190).[6] The same idea, when it recurs in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* as a characteristic of the title character's arachnoid nemesis the Other Mother, could derive from either Beagle or Tolkien, or both: "She could not truly make anything, decided Coraline. She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed" (117–118); "The other mother could not create. She could only transform, and twist, and change" (124). Testifying to its long legacy and wide reach, Gaiman in fact attributes his own discovery of Tolkien to Beagle's essay: "I first discovered Tolkien through an article by Peter S. Beagle (called, I think, Tolkien's Magic Ring,

in the Tolkien Reader)" ("Beagles"). Other such echoes have been charted by Christopher Cobb, who has closely compared *The Last Unicorn* with *The Lord of the Rings* in multiple respects, finding "reconfigurations of [Tolkien's] Mordor and Barad-dûr in images such as the barrenness of Haggard's country and the fall of his castle when the unicorns are released from the sea," and arguing that "the unicorn's quest to find her people is quite unlike Frodo's quest, but the climactic scene, in which Schmendrick's magic and the unicorn's courage arc both awakened, owes its structure to Tolkien's depiction of the awakening of Merry's courage on the fields of the Pelennor" (119).

Whether or not Cobb persuades us that Beagle's culminating scene derives from Tolkien's in a fashion we would describe as "owing," without a doubt the novel's conclusion as a whole converges with both the protracted resolution of *The Return of the King* and Tolkien's philosophy of fantasy as presented in "On Fairy-stories," in terms of both the desired "eucatastrophe" of the unexpected happy ending and the higher functions of fantasy in offering "Recovery, Escape, Consolation" (66–76). To begin with the last of these three terms, in this latter section of the talk-turned-essay, Tolkien introduces the term "eucatastrophe" in an influential passage addressing "[t]he consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale)":

> In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (75)

Not every happy ending in a fantasy novel need be understood as a Tolkienian eucatastrophe, but Beagle's single-line paragraph "Then the unicorns came out of the sea" punctuates just such a "turn" (268), and the impression that the moment leaves upon Molly instantiates Tolkien's more-than-corporeal joy: "her joy was too great for her body to understand" (269). Just as *The Lord of the Rings* continues on after Sauron's impossible

defeat, with additional if lesser joys and sorrows on the return journey and beyond, so too Beagle's novel does not end with this scene, but reckons the costs of victory, and its aftermaths: "For all that her quest had ended joyously, there was weariness in the way she held herself, and a sadness in her beauty that Molly had never seen" (271). Lír, too, must come to terms with his losses, and with the future bearing down on him in the tour of his kingdom that Schmendrick forces upon him. Remembering also that Tolkien tells us that "there is no true end to any fairy-tale" (75), we may hear another echo in these final scenes when Schmendrick refers to the unicorn herself, that symbol of fantasy, as "a story with no ending" (276). *The Last Unicorn* and *The Lord of the Rings* diverge in uncountable ways (and, counting them, by about 500,000 words in their respective lengths), but the reason why John Clute can describe *The Last Unicorn* so easily using the structuralist grammar for fantasy he derives from Tolkien's model —"Thinning," "Waste Land," "Kenosis," "Perception," "Wrongness" (94–95)—is that Beagle does follow Tolkien for his story's shape and scope.

Recovery, Escape, Consolation: the affinity that Beagle displays for the Tolkienian "consolation" of the eucatastrophic ending should be plain, but "Escape" is perhaps a more complex point of comparison. "Recovery," being the most abstract of the three, I will address at the conclusion of this chapter. In "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien considers many desires that fantasy can fulfill under the umbrella of "Escape," all of which resonate in some way with *The Last Unicorn*, including, for instance, "the desire to converse with other living things" (73). The unicorn's power to communicate with those who can hear her is of course foundational to *The Last Unicorn*, and David M. Miller has rightly commented on how the novel's fantasy relies on and "assumes an ontological plenitude with man in the middle: morally, physically, intellectually, spiritually," meaning a universe with different orders of nonhuman beings, some of whom we can access and converse with, including a canny cat (207). Next, Tolkien's rejection of modernity with its mechanization and mass production becomes clear in his emphasis on "the desire to escape, not indeed from life, but from our present time and self-made misery" (72), and ostensibly "progressive things like factories […] or machine-guns and bombs" (71); both Chap. 1 and Chap. 5 discuss Beagle's own various reactions against modernity and its ecological and psychological toll. The most sustained and direct parallels with the concerns of *The Last Unicorn*, however, involve what is for Tolkien "the oldest and

deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (74). Tolkien's offhand reversal of this idea, which imagines immortal beings telling stories about mortals—"The Human stories of the elves are doubtless full of the Escape from Deathlessness" (75)—may have informed Schmendrick's desire to shed his immortality and the unicorn's own acquisition of a kind of mortal part. Certainly Schmendrick's despair, to be discussed further below, reflects what Tolkien describes as the fairy-story's lessons about "the burden of […] immortality, or rather endless serial living" (75). Beagle's fantasy therefore touches on all of the "escapist" desires that Tolkien stresses as key to fantasy's operation, and of course for neither author is the adjective a pejorative.

Before exploring more deeply how Beagle handles the last of these desires or motifs, "death and the desire for deathlessness," it is important to clarify the very different ways in which Tolkien and Beagle approach their mutual theme due to the religious backgrounds of each and their possible intersections with their respective views on fantasy. As a Catholic, Tolkien naturally believed in an achievable "deathlessness" not in the sublunary world but beyond it, and indeed sees in fantasy's capacity for eucatastrophe an intimation of his theological views on salvation history: "The Birth of Christ is the Eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation" (78). As a secular Jew, Beagle departs from Tolkien on such points, and Michael Weingrad has written compellingly on some of the distinctively Jewish dimensions of *The Last Unicorn* itself: "With these roots in mid-20th-century American *Yiddishkeit*, Beagle's Jewishness inflects his fantasy writing in ways both direct and subtle" ("The Best Unicorn"). In Weingrad's reading, the unicorn's quest in fact "borders on secular post-Hasidic parables of God discovering what has become of His Jews in the wake of the Shoah," demonstrating several "suggestive" Holocaust parallels ("The Best Unicorn"). Beagle himself, when invited to "[t]alk about the influence of your Jewish background," once highlighted humor, tradition, and pessimism about human nature in light of the Holocaust:

> Some that I can see, and some I'm not sure of. Certainly a certain kind of humor, certain attitudes, love for continuity, and for tradition, surprising in storytelling. There are other things I'm not sure of, but I know I grew up Jewish in a post-Auschwitz era, and I

> grew up with a very, very clear understanding that there is nothing that human beings won't do to each other. I grew up really not liking the species I belonged to. I am always rather pessimistic. (Broughton 159)

Adam Roberts makes a more explicit connection between Jewish humor and Jewish trauma, discussing how Schmendrick, "the most manifestly Jewish character in the novel," represents "a figure from the rich tradition of Jewish comedy":

> Jewish comedy is a cultural tradition and idiom of long-standing of course. It is amongst other things a way of dealing with the dangers and precarity of living life as an outsider, as a persecuted other—a way both of defanging the hostility of others by making them laugh, and of coping psychologically with the trauma and stress of living life in such conditions. ("Jewish Fantasy")

Weingrad himself does not deny that "[s]ome of the novel's resonances are Christian as well": "How could they not be when the medieval unicorn was a symbol for Christ—and when the novel's unicorn is transformed into a human being?" ("The Best Unicorn"). Roberts tackles such sometimes dissonant resonances across fantasy itself, and his ultimate formulation, though imprecise, is difficult to disagree with: "[T]here's something going on in Fantasy, though often in subterranean ways, 'to do' with Christianity" ("Jewish Fantasy"). All the same, Geoffrey Reiter's straightforward identification of Beagle's unicorn as a figure of Christ can impose a complete Christian allegoresis only through oversimplification:

> As the medieval unicorn was considered a Christ figure, so too is Beagle's unicorn. She is immortal, then becomes mortal, descends into hell—the Red Bull's lair—and becomes immortal once again, so that she can save her people. It is this last glorified incarnation—this synthesis of immortality with mortality's pain and loss and its transient joy—that the unicorn finally embodies at the novel's end. (115)

Beagle is not after such allegory, although the fact that the author does not demonstrate an equivalent of the dedicated Catholicism of a Tolkien—who

described *The Lord of the Rings* as “of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work” (Letter 142, 172)—or of the apologetic motivations of a C. S. Lewis has not prevented scholars such as Weronica Łaszkiewicz from usefully applying “the field of phenomenology of religion to the study of literature” in his case as well (“The Unicorn as the Embodiment” 49).[7] Indeed, scholars have only begun to examine how Beagle’s religious and/or irreligious background and views—Weingrad refers to *The Last Unicorn* as a “classic of postbelief” (“The Best Unicorn”)—should be understood in connection with his fiction. But perhaps some additional conclusions can be drawn from puzzling over the conclusions on mortality and immortality that seem to emerge in *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle’s imaginative exercises in speaking to Tolkien’s “Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (74).

If “death and the desire for deathlessness” remains a more implicit focus of *The Lord of the Rings*, Beagle’s novel foregrounds both immediately, and, while introducing the unicorn as immortal, includes a number of images for death and mortality beginning in the first chapter. Overhearing the hunters’ report that no other unicorns exist in the world first disturbs the Edenic tranquility outside human time that she had enjoyed in her forest, and brings her the first such glimmer of mortality: “[F]or the first time she began to feel the minutes crawling over her like worms” (7). It is clear that these are the worms of the grave, so common in medieval *memento mori* illustrations and memorable from Hamlet’s lines about kings becoming food for worms (*Hamlet* 4.3). Intimations of mortality assault the unicorn repeatedly, most powerfully in Mommy Fortuna’s performance at her Midnight Carnival as Elli, or Old Age, “the Very End”: her haunting song —“*What is gone is gone*” (33)—instills a “helpless fear of growing old” (43). The fleeting butterfly, too, for whose health the unicorn worries so, represents an image of mortality lurking in a comic sequence: humans are butterflies from a unicorn’s perspective, knowing only those few songs and scraps we happen to hear in our short time alive. Encroaching mortality persists as a theme across Beagle’s oeuvre: even his teleplay for the 1990 *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode “Sarek” (S3E23) thematizes old age, featuring reflections by Captain Picard on the indignities of aging and decrepitude, with a kind of dementia allegory encoded in the sci-fi syndrome afflicting the eponymous elderly Vulcan. After escaping from Mommy Fortuna, the unicorn’s anxieties do not subside, and she imagines her fellows all changed into mortal human bodies, “trapped in burning

houses” (59), prior to her transformation into the human Lady Amalthea, which brings more visceral feelings of mortality yet: “This body is dying. I can feel it rotting all around me” (150). In Haggard’s castle, old age and death permeate the stones, and we meet a death’s head in the form of a speaking skull who watches over a clock, as well as the skeletal Haggard himself. The sea itself, the repository of the trapped immortals, becomes in Beagle’s novel a complex figure for both mortality and infinity, as the waves crest continually but threaten to claim Haggard and his precarious castle at every moment, always beautiful but also bearing an odor of death: as the newly mortal unicorn nears Haggard’s stronghold, “faintly, for the first time, the smell of the sea came to her” (153). The “death and the maiden” motif also enters the novel in the lyrics of the song performed perfunctorily for the unicorn by a bride-to-be, and later repeated by Amalthea: “*I grow old within* / *The prison of my person,* / *The shackles of my skin*” (102, 215). Death stalks Haggard’s wasteland kingdom but also the arcadian paradise where the novel begins, and above all the minds of the characters.

The unicorn’s panic upon becoming human brings with it not simply an awareness of her new mortality but also corresponding philosophical questions about meaning in the face of death: “How can anything that is going to die be real? How can it be truly beautiful?” (150). Amalthea grasps for a sense of meaning and purpose as she has never had to do before, now that her lifespan has become limited, and in her desperation raises questions about beauty, reality, and illusion, concepts that number among the novel’s other major themes, as many scholars have noted.[8] Schmendrick endeavors to calm her by filling in his own backstory, recounting the gift or curse that has made him immortal until he should come into his true magic: “I know something that a unicorn cannot know. Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world. Do you understand me?” (151). Amalthea replies a flat “No” in response to this paradoxical perspective (151), and throughout the novel Beagle’s characters express contradictory views of the superiority of mortality versus immortality, and the relative beauty of things that die and things imperishable, such that it can prove difficult to identify which among them the author might sanction. Ina Rae Hark is content to position Beagle as uncomplicatedly endorsing Schmendrick’s various defenses of mortality—“He tried to explain to the oak that love was generous precisely

because it could never be immortal" (95)—arguing that the author himself "prefers temporality to eternity, for the very brevity and vulnerability of life make it precious and engender the love and compassion that are the sources of all true magic in the novel" (532).[9] Conversely, Reiter attempts to resolve the dialogic disputes of the characters by means of a neat synthesis: "*The Last Unicorn* and its 2005 sequel 'Two Hearts' advocate a dialectic, a synthesis between the poles of mortality and immortality, suggesting that life ought to be lived in a balanced perspective that privileges neither the real no[r] the ideal but exults in both" (104):

> *The Last Unicorn* clearly indicates that *some kind* of immortality is valuable. Whether that immortality is an actual God, or some Platonic world of forms, or simply an aesthetic or religious ideal, something is required to elevate mortal human life, to cause us to strive, like Lír, to become greater than our current selves. Only by striking that precarious, all-important balance can we live full, happy, meaningful lives. (116)

Even here Reiter must leave many of the philosophical questions open, and part of the enduring power of the novel surely rests in its openness to multiple perspectives. Norford sees it as a key design principle: "Beagle has constructed the story so that every statement has its counterstatement. The result is a paradoxical coincidence of opposites: life and death, eternal and temporal are inextricably mingled" (101).

Synthesis can indeed seem elusive: at times a character will argue with their own previous points, and Schmedrick's initial explanation about the superior beauty of the mortal to the superlative beauty of the immortal is already self-contradictory. The unicorn also contradicts her own views on the superiority of immortality after she has remained in her human shape for some time, ceasing to prefer reverting to her former state to a mortal life and a mortal love—"It is good that everything dies" (249)—although in this case we might understand Amalthea as a distinct character and personality. In Haggard's castle, she comes to speak of herself as divided into two selves:

> Now I am two—myself, and this other that you call 'my lady.' For she is here as truly as I am now, though once she was only a veil

> over me. She walks in the castle, she sleeps, she dresses herself, she takes her meals, and she thinks her own thoughts. […] And every day she searches the sea and the sky, the castle and the courtyard, the keep and the king's face, for something she cannot always remember. What is it, what is it that she is seeking in this strange place? She knew a moment ago, but she has forgotten. (186)[10]

One of the novel's narratological intricacies involves the curious shift in perspective that has led us to this moment of self-disclosure. Readers ironically have the greatest access to the unicorn's mind when she is the least like us, immortal and self-absorbed in her wood, but the novel decenters and cuts us off from her perspective after she transforms into a human being: we have less access to her inner life as she herself becomes estranged from herself. Amalthea, then, is not the unicorn, but a separate self, a mortal part who does die, and something and someone that the changeless unicorn is no longer because it no longer exists, except in memory. Crucially, we are told that Amalthea dies not when Schmendrick's magic changes her back into the unicorn, but rather when Lír speaks her name afterward: "He saw the unicorn, and she shone in him as in a glass, but it was to the other that he called—to the castaway, to the Lady Amalthea. His voice was the end of her: she vanished when he cried her name, as though he had crowed for day" (260). Verbalizing the name kills Amalthea because names no longer apply to the unicorn: "Amalthea" is gone, a memory, as Molly can perceive: "It suddenly seemed to her that the unicorn's sorrow was not for Lír but for the lost girl who could not be brought back; for the Lady Amalthea, who might have lived happily ever after with the prince" (271). Here, too, we find an explanation for why the unicorn herself never has a name of her own. A name, Beagle suggests, signifies a mortal being with a beginning and an end, a date of birth and a date of death. A name is carved on a tombstone: Here Lies Amalthea, but the unicorn carries on, eternal.

Tolkien resolves the human desire to escape death through the consolation of the eucatastrophe, but we may well ask how "Escape" and "Consolation" might be linked for Beagle, if not by the same Christian theology that, in Tolkien's argument, maps the subcreator, the artist, onto a divine creator with a divine plan for human salvation in the real world. Upon its removal, Schmendrick's magical immortality is compared to a

funeral shroud that he sheds: “he felt his immortality fall from him like armor, or like a shroud” (259). In other words, the wizard’s “resurrection” is a backward one, a resurrection into mortal life rather than the eternal life promised by Christianity. Of course, *The Lord of the Rings* similarly cautions against a desire for mortals to contravene the divine plan and pursue immortality in the world, as Tolkien’s novel is filled with images of the sour, unnatural prolonging of life granted by evil magic such as that of the One Ring, and also emphasizes the weariness and sorrow of even those beings created immortal such as the elves. The supernaturally youthful Bilbo memorably uses appropriately hobbitish figurative language to describe himself as feeling “all thin, sort of *stretched*, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 41). Nevertheless, again, Tolkien’s theology inside and outside Middle-earth promises a life after death for mortal humans, unknowable but to be envied by the immortal orders of being: “Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy” (*Silmarillion* 42). With different theological premises, Beagle’s evocation of the unicorn’s own immortality can itself be disturbing, as in the remarkable passage in which the author reminds us that living forever means forever: “Often then, between the rush of one breath and the reach of another, it came to her that Schmendrick and Molly were long dead, and King Haggard as well, and the Red Bull met and mastered—so long ago that the grandchildren of the stars that had seen it all happen were withering now, turning to coal—and that she was still the only unicorn left in the world” (107). Here the unicorn imagines the distant future and her own continued existence there, almost as if she is taking the perspective of a mortal viewing eternity with vertiginous fear, imagining the stars burning out. What most frightens her about this future is her utter loneliness there, a suffering in solitude, and certainly Beagle does not encourage desire for eternal life when that life would be filled with anguish and despair. Indeed, both immortality and mortality become interlinked with despair throughout *The Last Unicorn*, embodied nowhere more intricately than in the primary antagonistic force in the novel, the Red Bull. Rather than any form of Tolkienian “Consolation,” meaning “Consolation” as a likeness of a real divine truth, counterbalanced against this entity and all it represents is instead Beagle’s version of Tolkien’s “Recovery,” a reenchantment of

modern, mortal life through art, imagination, and care. But first it is necessary to face the Bull.

The Many Meanings of the Red Bull and the Path to Recovery

As intimately tied as is the unicorn to Beagle's engagement with mortality and immortality is the figure of the Red Bull, at once the most original and least original of Beagle's fantastical creations. It is the least original and the most elemental in that both the color red and the image of the bull have accumulated a number of cultural associations and symbolic meanings over many millennia. But the idiosyncratic fusion of color, animal, and its other characteristics—blindness, apparent shifts in size and possibly even solidity, and more—generate a new myth in the Red Bull that transcends any one of the individual elements that constitute it. Beagle has pinpointed the origin of his bull as antagonist of unicorns in "a painting of unicorns fighting bulls" that he received as a gift from "a Spanish painter who married my cousin," Marcial Rodriguez (Tooker and Hofheins 5). Such an image demands interpretation, and fantasy scholars have, of course, eagerly risen to the hermeneutical challenge that the Red Bull presents. For instance, Sue Matheson, while conceding that "[t]he Red Bull is certainly not limited to one meaning," offers up interpretations rooted in ancient animal symbolism: "Traditionally the figure of a bull represents the masculine principle, heaven and the father. A lunar and a solar animal, however, the bull is linked not just with death, sacrifice, self-denial, and chastity, but also with rebirth and fecundity. In all palaeo-oriented cultures, a bull expresses the idea of power" (422). Matheson further invites us to see the Bull as the Greek minotaur with its own personification of a destructive, consuming masculinity: "Living beneath Haggard's castle, the Bull evokes the legend of the monster in the labyrinth of Knossos; leaving the castle, his humped shoulders and sloping back in the ocean recall Zeus's rape of Europa" (423).

Don Parry Norford adds that "[b]ulls are associated with the sea in Greek mythology" as "Poseidon and various river-gods often took the form of a bull" (98), and the Gothic labyrinth that is Haggard's castle by the sea might be seen to contain a minotaur that has been separated back into two,

Haggard and the Bull, each a devourer in their own ways. Łaszkiewicz concurs that "it is easy to perceive the Red Bull as the symbol of male virility and mature masculinity" and further argues that therefore "the Bull might be the external projection of the King's unfulfilled desires" ("Peter S. Beagle's Transformations" 58). In consequence, for Łaszkiewicz, the unicorn opposes such desire: "[I]n symbolic terms, the confrontation between the unicorns and the Bull is one between chastity and (Haggard's) masculine desire. Unicorn-Amalthea's own struggle to defeat the Bull exemplifies the symbolic dimension of this conflict" ("Peter S. Beagle's Transformations" 59). As we will see, many such interpretations of the Red Bull that seek to simplify or reduce its meaning to a singular one often rely on necessarily reductive understandings of the unicorn as the figure diametrically opposing the Bull, as here the unicorn must stand for chastity in a way that may seem at odds with Beagle's more complex treatment of the unicorn legend (which the next chapter will detail at length). It seems clear that the Bull must mean as much or more than the unicorn does, and Beagle's unicorn obviously means many things: we can see in them an opposition between joy and despair, beauty and power—the unicorn "as boundlessly beautiful as the Bull was mighty" (260)—and/or meaning and nonmeaning, among other such pairings. I would venture to propose that the Red Bull's primary meaning is in fact linked with meaninglessness, the creature functioning as a destroyer of meaning: the struggle of the unicorn and her human companions against it therefore becomes a struggle to find meaning against the background of a wasted landscape.

Both the text of the novel and Beagle's own consistently evasive authorial commentary concur that the Bull can only be understood as a fundamentally multiplex figure. For instance, when the unicorn asks Schmendrick what he might be able to tell her about the Red Bull, the long-lived wizard cannot provide any explanation that does not also come with its matching counter-explanation:

> I know less than I have heard, for I have heard too many tales and each argues with another. The Bull is real, the Bull is a ghost, the Bull is Haggard himself when the sun goes down. The Bull was in the land before Haggard, or it came with him, or it came to him. It protects him from raids and revolutions, and saves him the expense of arming his men. It keeps him a prisoner in his own castle. It is the

> devil, to whom Haggard has sold his soul. It is the thing he sold his soul to possess. The Bull belongs to Haggard. Haggard belongs to the Bull. (57–58)

Later, at the castle of King Haggard, rather than simply repeating the unicorn's initial ontological question to the butterfly—"What is the Red Bull?" (15)—Molly asks a more perceptive question of Haggard's four senescent men-at-arms, "What is the Red Bull to King Haggard?" (193). While Molly's shifting of the line of inquiry from the nature of the Bull to the relationship between it and the king speaks to her perspicuity, unfortunately the answers provide no real clarity:

> "We do not know. The Bull has always been here. It serves Haggard as his army and his bulwark; it is his strength and the source of his strength; and it must be his one companion as well, for I am sure he descends to its lair betimes, down some secret stair. But whether it obeys Haggard from choice or compulsion, and whether the Bull or the king is the master—that we have never known."
>
> The fourth man […] said, "The Red Bull is a demon, and its reckoning for attending Haggard will one day be Haggard himself." Another man interrupted him, insisting that the clearest evidence showed that the Bull was King Haggard's enchanted slave, and would be until it broke the bewitchment that held it and destroyed its former lord. They began to shout and spill their soup. (193)

Cannier still than Molly, Jean Tobin simply asked the author himself about the Bull, and references a 1978 telephone conversation in which Beagle equivocated, "Some days I know what he means, other days I don't" ("Introduction" xvi). Kenneth Zahorski indicates that the author has insisted that "he simply doesn't know what the Bull stands for" (52), but to Tobin Beagle did account for the ruddy and constantly shifting physical appearance of the Bull by pointing to the red, shapeshifting, and bull-like "monster from the id" of the 1956 science fiction film *Forbidden Planet*, implicitly tying its nature to the unconsciousness, with its endlessly elusive symbolic grammar (xvi).

The disagreements of Beagle scholars about the Red Bull have remained politer than those among the men-at-arms, though their views

have proved no less incommensurable. John Pennington, for one, turns to William Blake in order to associate the Red Bull with “pure corrupted experience,” in contrast to the innocence represented in the unicorn: “Like Blake, Beagle emphasizes the fearful symmetry between innocence and experience. The unicorn is untainted innocence, the Red bull pure corrupted experience” (15). It should of course be remembered that Molly Grue quite forcefully refutes Schmendrick’s declarations that unicorns are “for innocence and purity, for newness” and “for young girls”: “You don’t know much about unicorns” (98). Mitterecker interprets the Bull more literally as bodying forth “an all-devouring and blind desire to possess” (165), and, according to Norford, it “represents emptiness, dread, the pain and sorrow of life” (102).[11] Kath Filmer-Davies connects the Bull with “a sense of discomfiture in the presence of nameless fears,” but elaborates that it also “very clearly symbolises power—domination, control, festering malevolence” (104). Olderman allegorizes the Bull quite intricately as “the power that usurps man’s control of his own life” (227), this power fundamentally linked to fear, “that unseen force with its power vested nowhere that haunts us from behind the facts of our daily life,” ultimately also “the waste land maker” (228). If Haggard is the wounded Fisher King of Olderman’s allegorization, the Red Bull may well be the wound, or what proceeds from the wound, colored as it described like “the blood that stirs under an old wound that never really healed” (133). It should also be noted that, when Olderman applies the word “allegory” to Beagle’s novel, he takes care to emphasize that any of its allegorical figures, including the Bull, remain “widely suggestive rather than single objective manifestations of absolute divine Truth” (224). Dennis Wise suggests, far more concisely than Olderman, that the Red Bull could be mapped onto “old age” (“*The Last Unicorn*”); for Geoffrey Reiter, it predominates as “a symbol of mortality” (106); and for Zahorski, it also means “fear,” or more precisely “fear, despair, and death of self”: “Clearly the Red Bull means different things to different people. But most often he seems to stand for fear and its attendant feelings—the doubts, the uncertainties, the anxieties and apprehensions that impede our quest for self-fulfillment and happiness” (52). Tobin has also linked Haggard with greed and the Red Bull with fear (“Werewolves” 188), and, in support of Olderman and Zahorski’s broad views linking the Bull closely with fear, we might adduce Molly’s apparently incidental chastisement of Cully—“I’ve come to think the Bull’s

nought but the pet name you give your cowardice" (79)—and also a hesitant comment Beagle has ventured after being pressed on the subject: "I can sort of explain him after the fact, as pure blind terror made more or less corporeal" (Tobin, "Introduction" xvi).

It may be possible to synthesize many among this range of views by connecting the Bull not so much with a simple fear of death, but a fear of death without meaning—and a fear of life without meaning, for that matter. More than a visceral fear of death the Red Bull suggests fear of forgetting and being forgotten in death, possessed of the power not just to kill but also to "make her forget what she was" (134), portending an oblivion that is nonbeing, not even in memory, a never-having-been, just as the butterfly describes the fate of the unicorns in a refrain she later repeats to herself twice: "They passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them and covered their footprints" (15, 58, 135). In other words, the Red Bull portends not simply nonexistence but total erasure, the destruction of a thing "swa heo no wære," as if it never were, to quote a line from a poem that Tolkien adapted into one of his own for *The Lord of the Rings*, the Old English elegy known as *The Wanderer* (96b).[12] So too might we compare Tolkien's famous assessment of the subject of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, "man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time," as expressed in his influential "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" (18). Tolkien looks beyond time at eternity, "Joy beyond the walls of the world" ("On Fairy-stories" 75), but Beagle must find other ways to combat time, just as the solution to the riddle of how to enter the clock and reach the Red Bull's lair requires the breakthrough that "You can strike your own time, and start the count anywhere" (236–237). The novel is full of characters who feel trapped by time as much as their specific circumstances, with the unicorn feeling "the minutes crawling over her like worms" (7), Molly Grue weeping for her wasted youth and wasted life in the Greenwood upon meeting the unicorn (97), and Schmendrick, wisecrack as often as he may, expressing perhaps the deepest despair about what he perceives to be repetitive, unfulfilling failure of a life, Schmendrick, for whom the unicorn means a "last chance" (40):

> The magician said, "I entertain the sightseers as they gather for the show. Miniature magic, sleight of hand—flowers to flags and flags to fish, all accompanied by persuasive patter and a suggestion that I

> could work more ominous wonders if I chose. It's not much of a job, but I've had worse, and I'll have better one day. This is not the end." But the sound of his voice made the unicorn feel as though she were trapped forever, and once more she began pacing her cage, moving to keep her heart from bursting with the terror of being closed in. (28)

One cannot strike one's own time, the novel suggests, if one has no sense of meaning or purpose, a meaninglessness in death as frightening as a meaninglessness in life, especially an immortal life.

In Beagle's novel *The Folk of the Air*, one character refers to being "sad for no reason" as "The American ailment, it goes away" (200); the individual despairs of the questing characters in *The Last Unicorn* sometimes approach what in the twenty-first century might read as depression of one form or another, particularly when they enter the orbit of King Haggard, his fortress a supermassive black hole of despondency: "Life in the castle went on in the silence that fills a place where no one hopes for anything" (212). In the castle and indeed in the novel, Prince Lír alone seems immune to the despair afflicting the other characters; only he could say reassuringly, "It's just the Bull," as if it is something he has learned to live with (160). Arguably the low point in the narrative, the time when the quest seems most in peril of failing, occurs not when the prince falls before the Bull, but here in the daily dejection of this grim season of the soul:

> Schmendrick fooled and juggled and flimflammed as the king bade him, hating it, and knowing that Haggard knew he hated it and took his pleasure thereby. He never again suggested to Molly that they escape from the castle before Haggard made sure of the truth of the Lady Amalthea; but he no longer sought to discover the secret way down to the Red Bull, even when he was allowed time to himself. He seemed to have surrendered, not to the king but to some far older, crueler enemy that had caught up with him at last, this winter in this place. (213)

That "older, crueler enemy," a despair clinically diagnosable or otherwise, has more power over the characters than Haggard, a victim of it in his own ways; Norford describes Schmendrick and the others in similar terms:

“Throughout the book he has been rather aloof and uncommitted. Infected —as indeed are most of the characters—by Haggard-like cynicism and despair; but when he sees Lír’s heroic death, buried reserves of emotion are unleashed” (101). Magic or its absence indeed seems connected to this sadness, both as the general object of Schmendrick’s lifelong desire and juxtaposed with it in the following passage earlier in the narrative: “The rain that renewed Molly did not fall on him, and he seemed ever more parched and deserted, like the land itself. The unicorn could not heal him. A touch of her horn could have brought him back from death, but over despair she had no power, nor over magic that had come and gone” (106). Chapter 4 will take up the meaning(s) of magic within the novel, and consider its relationship to the power of art and fiction, but for now it is sufficient to take as axiomatic Olderman’s points that “Beagle’s allegory focuses on both the wonder of the imagination and the wonder of the world” (237), and that the artist-magician/magician-artist assists in leading others away from modern disenchanted despair to an appreciation of that wonder: “The moral of the fable lies in learning how to see” (237).

Among Tolkien’s principles of “Recovery, Escape, Consolation,” then, the nearer overlap between Tolkien’s theory of fantasy and Beagle’s own may instead lie in the concept of “Recovery,” a term which we might dare to use more or less interchangeably with “reenchantment.” It has become a commonplace of fantasy scholarship that the form seeks reenchantment of one form or another; as Adam Roberts puts it, “the whole mode exists in reaction to what Weber diagnosed as the ‘disenchantment’ of modernity” (“Jewish Fantasy”). *The Last Unicorn*, however, as a metafiction, reflects conspicuously on such reenchantment. Without referring to “On Fairy-stories,” Olderman makes many suggestive observations about *The Last Unicorn* that resonate with Tolkien’s piece nonetheless: “The rediscovery of wonder in the world may ultimately be the best our decade can offer […] to move us out of the waste land” (222); “Beagle hopes to revalue what we have seen too often—to revalue by making us see anew” (222). Tolkien speaks of such a seeing anew as key to fantasy’s capacity for “Recovery,” a “regaining of a clear view”: “We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make” (67). How connected such a recovery or

reenchantment is for Tolkien with the specter of mortality is evident in the line in which he clarifies that “fairy-stories are not the only means of recovery, or prophylactic against loss” (68), setting recovery in apposition with a defense against loss. The unicorn laments the disenchanted state of the world and the state of humanity, so badly in need of recovery, after she begins to understand that she is no longer recognized for what she is:

> “How can it be?” she wondered. “I suppose I could understand it if men had simply forgotten unicorns, or if they had changed so that they hated all unicorns now and tried to kill them when they saw them. But not to see them at all, to look at them and see something else—what do they look like to one another, then? What do trees look like to them, or houses, or real horses, or their own children?” (11)

In the unicorn’s ailing world, it is not so much that humans no longer believe in magic or perceive immortal animals, but that their entire sense of reality and of one another has become attenuated. Tolkien, again, adduces fantasy’s capacity for recovery as a possible prescription:

> By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory. And actually fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. […] It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine. (68–69)

For Tolkien as for Beagle, fantasy turns us toward and not away from the world we inhabit, but it allows us to see in fresh and refreshed ways. Molly Grue and Schmendrick can recognize the unicorn because they can already see many other things about the world as well, and the novel’s climactic image of the unicorns bursting from the sea—“She was wise enough to know that no mortal was ever meant to see all the unicorns in the world” (268)—portend a more widely renewed future.

In the end, for Beagle, such a recovery may itself be all the consolation fantasy can offer. Medievalist Alexandra Hennessey Olsen has even framed *The Last Unicorn* as a kind of "anti-consolation," contrasting the novel with *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a book by the early medieval Christian philosopher Boethius about which C. S. Lewis has written, "To acquire a taste for it is almost to become naturalised in the Middle Ages" (*The Discarded Image* 75): "*The Last Unicorn* is best described as Beagle's answer to one of the most important philosophical works of the Western world, the allegorical *De Consolatione Philosophiae*" (133). While I would disagree with Olsen that "*The Last Unicorn* shows the influence of the *Consolatio* in both form and content" (143), if by this she means that Beagle must have read and intentionally responded to the text, the article masterfully traces some parallels and ironic inversions related to Beagle's decidedly non-medieval, non-Christian outlook on the transitory and the eternal: "Beagle's message is the opposite of that taught by Philosophy" (143); "In Boethius, the love of transitory things—riches, honor, and even family members—puts one in the power of Fortune, and one will inevitably be betrayed by her. In contrast, in Beagle it is the love of the immutable which betrays people and makes them prisoners of Fortune" (141). That neither Haggard nor the people of Hagsgate—from one perspective the perfect Boethian subjects—trust or take pleasure in fortune's fleeting gifts results in their spiritual immiseration, rather than the happiness that Boethius predicts. The first Hagsgate episode likely proves the most didactic in the novel, with its implicit condemnation of the townsfolk's response to their wealth, and therefore most aligned with medieval Christian literature's dominant mode:

> How can we delight in our good fortune when we know that it must end, and that one of us will end it? Every day makes us richer, and brings us one day nearer to our doom. Magician, for fifty years we have lived leanly, avoided attachments, untied all habits, readying ourselves for the sea. We have taken not a moment's joy in our wealth—or in anything else—for joy is just one more thing to lose. (120)

Olsen also observes that Beagle's decision to follow Tolkien in filling his novel with poetry and song imitates the *Consolation*'s genre, the

"*prosimetrum,* in which prose and verse passages alternate" (135), and she demonstrates how such a formal convergence can nevertheless result in "an inversion of traditional Boethian patterns and motifs" (134). Overall, then, Olsen's argument accounts for how Beagle can deploy medieval Christian imagery to tell a story finally quite discordant with medieval Christian perspectives, unlike his predecessors in fantasy Tolkien and Lewis, who use medieval Christian imagery precisely in order to revive aspects of that worldview that they admire.

If, then, we find our negative moral examples in Haggard and those "cursed" people of Hagsgate—who possess all they could want materially and yet have no sense of meaning or purpose or joy—Prince Lír, child of both Haggard and Hagsgate, remains free of their curse and proves its antidote; his heroism is much larger than himself, however. The community of his parents had resolved to march to extinction, their fear of losing what they have leading them to take no pleasure in anything, but a new generation carries on in spite of their self-destructive impulses. Not coincidentally, Lír may also be the only character in the novel apparently unaffected by the despair that afflicts all the rest: indeed, in Schmendrick's view, he needed to learn sorrow by the story's end in order to become further ennobled by his loss of Amalthea: "Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed. It is all part of the fairy tale" (291). There may be no truly transcendent perspective in *The Last Unicorn* beyond such a faith in the next generation represented by Lír and the potential for a renewed future for and in the mortal world signaled by the freeing of the unicorns; after Haggard's downfall Schmendrick counsels Lír's new subjects to "have children" (283). This ultimate rejection of immortality in or beyond the world perhaps helps elucidate why Haggard, watching his unicorns rise and fall on the waves that trap them in a process of infinite repetition and infinite sameness, cannot ever be happy, yet the unicorn, watching transient mortal things live and die in constant permutations and change, can be much more than content doing so: "Generation after generation, wolves and rabbits alike, they hunted and loved and had children and died, and as the unicorn did none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them" (2). And yet this image of the unicorn watching mortal lives, coupled with an exasperated joke of which Schmendrick repents—"As for you and your heart and the things you said and didn't say, she will remember them all when men are fairy tales in

books written by rabbits” (286)—also intriguingly imagines a nonhuman perspective that, if not truly transcendent in a literal sense, affirms Beagle’s commitments to decentering the human and countering Anthropocentricism. The world beyond the individual becomes transcendent, such that Beagle finally trains our eyes not on any afterlife, but rather on that broader world and its future.

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Footnotes

1 Harold Jaffe's 1968 review observes that the earliest critical reception of the book also relied heavily on Tolkien comparisons, which he does not shy from making himself: "Inevitably, critics have compared *The Last Unicorn* to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings.* Beagle's book is less ambitious, yet it comes closer to poetry" (447).

2 Beagle consistently celebrates Robert Nathan, one of the dedicatees of *The Last Unicorn*, as his most important model and mentor, and, among contemporary fantasists, praises Ursula K. Le Guin the most regularly in interviews, as well as his friend Patricia A. McKillip. He has referred to Le Guin as "the wisest of us all," for example ("Back Then" 19).

3 Compare also Tolkien's Letter 186: "The real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality" (*Letters* 246).

4 Beagle's interpretation of Gollum as having murdered to obtain the Ring "for no reason that he can say except that it is more beautiful than anything that has ever come into his life" further anticipates his own depiction of Haggard as motivated by the intensity of his reaction to the beauty of the unicorns that he hoards (xiii): "I said to the Red Bull, 'I must have that. I must have all of it, all there is, for my need is very great'" (221).

5 When asked such a question by an interviewer—"Your own work isn't terribly socially oriented, is it?"—Beagle more or less concurred with Wise's perspective, replying, "No, I don't think of it" (Broughton 160). Even so, the strongest hint of sociopolitical allegory in *The Last Unicorn* may connect the people of Hagsgate with a kind of banality of evil, ignoring horrific crimes in their backyards that they "pretended not to see": "[A] middle-aged woman stepped forward and said with some spirit, 'It all seems a bit unfair, my lord, begging your pardon. What could we have done to save the unicorns? We were afraid of the Red Bull. What could we have done?' 'One word might have been enough,' King Lír replied. 'You'll never know now'" (281). The witch who built

Haggard's castle had earlier warned them about lords and leaders unchecked by their populace, "Stop him while you can, before you grow used to him" (116).

6 Beagle references the point in "Tolkien's Magic Ring," calling orcs and trolls "as incapable of any creation as their lord" (xiv).

7 In her essay "The Unicorn as the Embodiment of the Numinous in the Works of Peter S. Beagle," Łaszkiewicz focuses on Beagle's more recent unicorns, particularly in "My Son Heydari and the Karkadann" (2017) and *In Calabria* (2017), in order to argue that "Beagle's latest unicorns function as the embodiment of Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous" (46), in her definition "a divine entity whose nature, due to its explicit and absolute otherness, is beyond the scope of human understanding" (46). Łaszkiewicz admits that "it is difficult to determine unequivocally if he was directly inspired by Otto," also notably a Christian theologian (56), although elsewhere she has not hesitated, like Reiter, to propose Christian elements in the novel: "Though Beagle's reconstruction of the traditional mythos produced a very unique Unicorn, connections to Christianity can nonetheless be found. Firstly, the female Unicorn is still linked to Christ: her metamorphosis is a distant echo of divinity incarnated in human flesh, and her greatest miracle is resurrecting Lír. Secondly, her fate resembles that of Adam and Eve, who lived in the Garden of Eden until they received knowledge of good and evil, and their own sexuality" ("Peter S. Beagle's Transformations" 60).

8 Colin Manlove judges the "single theme running through the book" to be "reality versus illusion" (150), and Don Parry Norford pursues this theme as length: "Poetry is more real than life—and yet at the same time a magical evocation or illusion; just as our life is real, or true, yet also false—a constant betrayal of ourselves, our deepest hopes, convictions, and potentialities" (94). David Van Becker also notes the novel's interest in "exploring the nature of reality in the modern world" (53), and Richard C. West emphasizes the relationship of illusion to self-deception and describes one of the antagonistic characters in *The Folk of the Air* as "display[ing] one of the most common forms of human self-deception: the denial of the other, keeping oneself from accepting that any subject outside one's own ego has real existence and that others have rights and feelings" (48), a description that resonates with Haggard's own self-centeredness. West continues, "Illusions, whether magical or psychological, can be maintained only with a great expenditure of effort. Reality surges in when the unicorn opens the cages" (50).

9 Because Schmendrick voices this version of the argument in order to convince the amorous tree to release him from its death grip, we may be less inclined to take it seriously, but compare a line from Molly's song, "*We can love but what we lose*" (105).

10 While earlier in this chapter I argued against making too much of any Christian resonances in this novel composed by a self-identifying secular Jew, this passage represents the moment in the novel that most puts me in mind of the medieval Christianity that, after all, refined the unicorn's symbolism: the "castaway" Amalthea's words read much like medieval allegories of the immortal

soul trapped in a mortal body moving through the material world (260), where it is always in danger of forgetting its immortal home, ultimate destiny, and true nature. For an exemplary treatment of the motif in Old English literature, see Riyeff, “Dualism in Old English Literature.”

11 Like Pennington, Norford understands the symbolic charge of Red Bull as opposed to the unicorn’s: “The unicorn represents fullness, the overflowing horn of plenty, the bounty and beauty of life” (102). The name that the unicorn receives as a human, “Amalthea,” reinforces the association with the horn of plenty. In the 2011 interview that appears with the graphic novel adaptation of the novel, Beagle reports that, when he chose the name, he had had only “some vague recollection that it came from Greek mythology,” and only later appreciated its appropriateness, in that Amalthea is “the name of the goat who nursed the infant god Zeus when he was being hidden from his father,” and a one-horned goat at that: “[A]t some point he accidentally broke off one of her horns. He was immediately apologetic, of course, and turned the broken-off horn into the cornucopia—the Horn of Plenty. But Amalthea only had one horn from then on, so in a real sense she was the first unicorn” (157).

12 In Hagsgate, Drinn insists that “[t]here never were” unicorns (118). Tolkien’s poem closely adapts lines from *The Wanderer*, and begins with the half-line “*Where now the horse and the rider?*” (*The Two Towers* 112).

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3. Unicorn Lore: The Multiple Mythologies Behind *The Last Unicorn*

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We do not know what a unicorn is like. [No sabemos cómo es el unicornio.]
—Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and His Precursors" (Selected Non-fictions 364)
Unicorns prod our ease.
—Norma Farber, "Unicorns at Harvard" (90)

Abstract
Beagle's unicorn stands at a unique place within the many overlapping traditions of unicorn lore, as his novel synthesizes and also departs from several preexisting traditions in ways that have collectively shaped the modern image of the unicorn. This chapter surveys some of the precedents for Beagle's characterization of his unicorn, and also exhaustively tracks the many other allusions and references that appear in the speech of the butterfly that she encounters. The novel's numerous such references speak to a key narrative strategy of Beagle's in self-reflexively remixing and reshaping past traditions in unexpected but not completely unfamiliar ways.

Keywords Unicorns – Mythology – Medieval bestiaries – *Physiologus*

“Creatures of Night, Brought to Light”: Mining the Many Menageries of Myth

Tolkien famously disapproved of his friend C. S. Lewis’s Narnia books in part for their relentless mixing and matching of mythologies, and the concomitant inconsistencies of their storyworld; as Tolkien’s biographer Humphrey Carpenter puts it, “He disliked works of the imagination that were written hastily, were inconsistent in their details, and were not always totally convincing in their evocation of a ‘secondary world’” (223).[1] Beagle violates these ironclad Tolkienian principles for constructing coherent fantasy worlds, as *The Last Unicorn* mixes and remixes multiple overlapping mythic, folkloric, and literary traditions, including classical and medieval unicorn lore; Greek and Norse mythology; motifs from European fairy tales; stories of Robin Hood and nineteenth-century ballad collections; stray lines from Shakespeare; and the butterfly’s assortment of other allusions ancient, medieval, and hypermodern. This chapter, in documenting some of the many allusions and references in the novel, aims in the end not to generate a simple source study, but will begin to demonstrate how Beagle builds on and out of these precedents, and also uses pastiche as a formal strategy related to his use of humor and metafiction, as will be more fully articulated in the following chapter. While the conceit of the “Midnight Carnival” within the novel is that it combines incompatible mythologies in an attempt to cash in on their universal appeal to the ignorant, Beagle does not hesitate himself to imagine a world that seems to include medieval European feudalism and absolute monarchs; tacos, tea, bottle caps, and pistols; magazines and trains; and historical personages and mythological figures alike treated as actually existing, such as the nineteenth-century folklorist Francis James Child and the harpy Celaeno, although crucially not Robin Hood, a confirmed fiction in this world, yet a fiction that is larger, “truer” than life: “You called up Robin Hood, and there is no Robin Hood, but he came, and he was real. And that is magic” (139). In delving more deeply into the backgrounds of Beagle’s multifaceted meta-mythology, this chapter will emphasize premodern unicorn lore and the literary mythology represented in the veritable cosmos of allusions that constitute the unicorn’s conversation with the wandering butterfly in the book’s first chapter. How Beagle borrows from, augments,

and redirects the existing body of so-called unicorn lore will become clearer after a closer examination of his precedents, and so too after chasing all of them down will we better understand how he orients himself and his work as a writer in relation to the webs of lyrical references embedded in the butterfly's chaotic patter.

Before we consider unicorns and butterflies, a word, first, on "mythology" itself and what the concept may mean for Beagle. Jean Tobin has written that *The Last Unicorn* and its characters "triumphantly assert the power of myth" ("Werewolves" 187). At the same time, the novel appears to treat the mythological and folkloric material on which it is grounded with a comedic irreverence, its mythic allusions regularly taking the form of ironic juxtapositions and deflations. Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival literally pulls down classical pantheons, promising gawkers to have caged even Jörmungandr, the earth-encircling World Serpent, for penny viewing, which prompts one onlooker to inquire reasonably enough, "If this big snake do be coiled around the world, as you say, how come you to be having a piece of it in your wagon?" (26).[2] Just as some true essence of Robin Hood does underlie the debased mercenary imitation represented by Captain Cully and his not-so-merry men in the Greenwood, which Schmendrick's artful magic or magical artistry can bring forth in spite of Cully's pettiness (87–89), so too does Mommy Fortuna's sideshow preserve —and in the terms of the novel celebrate—the essential power of myth in the form of the harpy and the unicorn, behind all the cheap tricks and false advertising.[3] Indeed, both Schmendrick and the butterfly who parrots whatever scraps of myth he may pick up serve as self-deprecating stand-ins for the artist and Beagle himself, as Chap. 4 will discuss in the context of the novel's metafictional dimensions; Beagle even sees himself the most in this unassuming insect among all his many characters: "I memorize poems without even knowing I'm doing it. I've total recall for song lyrics" (Broughton 150). The role of a humble butterfly in the transmission of lofty mythologies should not surprise us when we remember the place of metamorphosis in its lifecycle, and the possible connection with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, that all-influential compendium of classical mythology. Change and metamorphosis have always been essential to the operation of myth-making.

Because of their familiarity and their incidental role in the narrative, it should not be necessary to elaborate at length on each mythological creature

of the carnival or the central characters from the Robin Hood ballads alluded to in the Greenwood interlude, but perhaps some elucidation is merited for Mommy Fortuna's grand finale, with herself playing the role of "Elli," Old Norse for "Old Age." Here Beagle relies on an episode recounted in the *Prose Edda*, one of the two major sources for Norse mythology, in which the mighty god Thor is tricked into a wrestling match with an unassuming old woman who manages to defeat him. Just as even Thor can be laid low by the power of Old Age, the unicorn similarly appears more frightened by Elli than by the murderous harpy, the latter of whom she acknowledges as kindred: "Oh, you are like me!" (52). Mommy Fortuna's performance as Elli does not make it into the 1982 children's film adaptation, but remains central to both the novel's larger themes, as explored in the previous chapter, and her own character as a lover of "show business" unto death itself (37). In her own way, Mommy Fortuna—according to Beagle's assessment, "probably more of a 20th-century character than anyone else in the book because all that matters is her success" (*The Last Unicorn* [IDW] 157)—is also a modern mythmaker, although a misguided one.

More important to *The Last Unicorn* than Greek or Norse myth—or even unicorn lore itself—is the fundamentally literary mythology of which these others remain but a part, and into which the butterfly's discourse, a relentless string of specific allusions, provides the clearest window. Beagle's vision of a literary mythology freely mixes popular culture and high culture, the most mannered formal poetry with traditional folk song and children's rhymes, and indeed encompasses anything with the power to last, to occupy space in memory. What David Stevens has described as the butterfly scene's "juxtaposition of the ridiculous and the sublime" sets the tone for the novel ("Incongruity" 230). Some of the novel's allusions and references aim for the profound or evoke the beautiful; some regurgitate the useless or serve only the ridiculous; sometimes the profound and the ridiculous intermix with one another, or result in a constant flux, like Schmendrick's magic "variously profound and frivolous" (172), a gyration between sublime and absurd embodied in the hybrid form of the unicorn: "[E]ven Molly, who loved her, could not keep from seeing that a unicorn is an absurd animal when the shining has gone out of her" (139). In these and other ways the novel attempts to blend what Geoffrey Chaucer called "earnest" and "game," the serious and the comic, the human and the

inhuman, and all the other contrasts and contraries that commentators such as Don Parry Norford have found at work in it, implying in his view “the interdependence of such opposites as reality and illusion, eternity and time, life and death”: “The truth of one does not negate, but paradoxically affirms, the equal truth of the other” (95).[4] If jingles advertising antiperspirants can stick in our memories alongside Shakespeare, this incongruity only confirms that myths can be born from unlikely places, absurd and preposterous composites like the unicorn itself.

Beagle’s Uses and Reconfigurations of Premodern Unicorn Lore

If Beagle had the fortune to discover and absorb Tolkien as a teenager, he had been intimately acquainted with unicorns from far earlier in childhood. He often recounts a memory of his elementary schoolteacher mother’s that attests to a precocious penchant for telling stories about unicorns: “my mother has a clear memory of my coming to a class of hers and briskly taking over the afternoon and telling her students all about unicorns” (Greenland 289). Even so, until late in his career Beagle long attempted to resist becoming known as “the unicorn writer”: “I had no intention of ever touching unicorns again after *The Last Unicorn*. I don’t like to repeat myself anyway. And it became obvious that I was going to be stuck with unicorns forever so I better avoid the issue as much as possible” (Greenland 289). Unicorns of various kinds entirely unconnected with the world of *The Last Unicorn* begin to proliferate across several of Beagle’s shorter works, including “Professor Gottesman and the Indian Rhinoceros” (1995), “Julie’s Unicorn” (1995), *The Unicorn Sonata* (1996), “Olfert Dapper’s Day” (2012), “The Story of Kao Yu” (2016), “My Son Heydari and the Karkadann” (2017), and *In Calabria* (2017). Beagle has attributed the existence of the short novel *The Unicorn Sonata* and his co-editorship of the anthology *Peter S. Beagle’s Immortal Unicorn* to his editor Janet Berliner’s persistent pestering and his own financial exigency, and insisted just a few years before the composition of “Two Hearts” that “Julie’s Unicorn” would be his final unicorn story: “I swear that’s absolutely the last one. Honest to God. I’m off it entirely. I’m clean” (Greenland 290).[5] More unicorns of course did follow, although, as Chap. 5 will speak of further, his

works that revisit *The Last Unicorn* are conspicuous for their minimal unicorn content. As we will see in this section, what Beagle suppresses, ignores, or pares away from the body of existing unicorn lore may be more revealing than what he preserves from it. At the time it was highly novel to feature a female unicorn who also focalizes much of the narrative, and that all-important three-word sentence "Unicorns are immortal" has also done much to construct the contemporary fantasy unicorn (2).

Beagle has mentioned that Odell Shepard's comprehensive 1930 study *The Lore of the Unicorn* was not available to him before beginning to conjure up his own unicorn, although some cursory research into existing unicorn traditions did include riffling through a public library's card catalog in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, which led him to discover the "fact" referenced in the novel's dedication, which is that a Dr. Olfert Dapper "saw a wild unicorn in the Maine woods in 1673" (*The Overneath* 295). In part because Beagle himself was not familiar with it in great detail during his process of composition, there is no need to rehearse the entire genealogy of the unicorn in scrupulous detail; such a history, in capsule form, would typically run from the first-known reference in the Greek author Ctesias in the fourth century BC to Pliny the Elder's imperial Roman *Natural History* to the early Christian text known as the *Physiologus* to the high medieval bestiary tradition to the later sets of tapestries from around the year 1500. The all-important medieval Christian image of the fierce unicorn tamable only by a virgin originates in the late classical *Physiologus*, a widely influential source for both medieval natural history and the allegorizations of that (ostensibly) zoological information that would come to define the characteristic form of the bestiary, or compendium of animals, as it developed in the later Middle Ages. The section on the unicorn in Michael J. Curley's translation of the *Physiologus* begins with the passage from the Biblical book of Deuteronomy also referenced by Beagle's butterfly (more on which to follow), and continues with some of the interpretations that would become standard in later medieval bestiaries:

> In Deuteronomy Moses said while blessing Joseph, "His beauty is that of the firstling bull, and his horns are the horns of the unicorn" [Deut. 33:17]. The monoceras, that is, the unicorn, has this nature: he is a small animal like the kid, is exceedingly shrewd, and has one horn in the middle of his head. The hunter cannot approach him

> because he is extremely strong. How then do they hunt the beast? Hunters place a chaste virgin before him. He bounds forth into her lap and she warms and nourishes the animal and takes him into the palace of kings. The unicorn has one horn because the Savior said, "I and the Father are one" [John 10:30]. "For he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" [Lk. 1:69]. Coming down from heaven, he came into the womb of the Virgin Mary. "He was loved like the son of the unicorns" [cf. Ps. 22:21] as David said in the psalm. (51)

Much of this same information appears in the description of the unicorn from the twelfth-century Latin bestiary preserved in Cambridge University Library MS Ii.4.26 and translated by none other than T. H. White as *The Book of Beasts*, a work beloved by Beagle (*Garden of Earthly Delights* 37). The author similarly observes the humility of Christ reflected in the unicorn's small size, and overall affirms in several ways that "Our Lord Jesus Christ is also a unicorn spiritually, about whom it is said: 'And he was beloved like the Son of the Unicorn'" (21). The medieval unicorn thus acquired several superlative associations with Christ, Mary, and kings and kingship, although Beagle's unicorn ironizes these premodern Christian resonances in various ways.

White's bestiary's description concludes with a final detail inherited from Isidore's seventh-century *Etymologies*, which is that "[t]he Unicorn often fights with elephants, and conquers them by wounding them in the belly" (21), a pugilistic predilection more routinely assigned to the dragon, notorious ambusher of elephants. Bestiary illustrations often depict dragons as locked in combat with elephants, including one such illustration in the Cambridge University Library manuscript, corresponding with the entry for the dragon, which describes how this great serpent likes to surprise and strangulate elephants (166–167).[6] In *The Last Unicorn*, we know that the unicorn has herself battled with dragons rather than engaging with elephants, as the novel's opening chapter numbers dragon-slaying among the marvelous feats achieved with her horn: "She had killed dragons with it" (2).[7] As if in mock-bestiary fashion, Beagle's 1962 first draft of the novel elaborates further that "[t]he hatred between dragons and unicorns goes a long way back": "when they meet they must fight, and one of them always dies" (*The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* 3).[8] Compare White's

bestiary's entry for elephant, which notes that "there is a certain dragon which is inimical to elephants," and, intriguingly, that the elephant "is also formidable to bulls" (26): Beagle seems to have done some mixing and matching of animal antagonists, and we can observe another such kind of feud still alluded to in Lord Dunsany's 1940 "Jorkens" short story "The Lion and Unicorn"—the heraldric pairing that reflects the union of the English and Scottish kingdoms—in which we hear of unicorns habitually defeating lions with their horns: "Many a man comes home with a lion-skin with a neat round hole through the side, which he says was made by a bullet. You can take your choice. You can believe him or me" (97).[9] For Beagle to pit the unicorn against a new nemesis, his own mythic creation the Red Bull, therefore, both participates in and reworks a premodern tradition.

Perhaps even more instrumental in the continuing prominence of the unicorn in the European imagination than its place in the bestiaries was the Biblical imprimatur it acquired through some quirks of translation. The second chapter of Shepard's *The Lore of the Unicorn* documents the seven passages from the King James Bible that mention the creature and how they collectively conjure the image of "a beast remarkable for strength, ferocity, wildness, and unconquerable spirit," and also "mysterious enough to inspire a sense of awe, and powerful enough to provide a vigorous metaphor" (42). The unicorn became authenticated in Biblical tradition through this English translation of the Greek word "monoceros," itself a translation of the Hebrew "re'em," a term now more commonly translated as "wild ox" or "aurochs"; earlier, the Vulgate's Latin had used the familiar "unicornis" in some but not all of those same passages. The reference in Deuteronomy 33:17, quoted by Beagle's own butterfly, naturally proves most important to *The Last Unicorn*, and it seems to have suggested elements of the mythology defining both the unicorn and the Red Bull: "His firstling bull has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he shall push the peoples, all of them, to the ends of the earth" (15). Geoffrey Reiter has picked up on the detail that the butterfly quotes from the Revised Standard Version in both the original 1962 draft and the published version, which obscures the fact that "wild ox" read "unicorn" at some points in history in some languages, while in that first draft also making explicit the earlier identification of the wild ox with the unicorn in the King James Version: "Biblical: a two-horned animal called *reem* in Hebrew. A. V.

Deuteronomy xxxiii, 17" (*The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* 31, also quoted in Reiter 111n2). While Beagle chose to remove this reference to Hebrew, in his novel about a last unicorn—its fellows trapped in the sea—Beagle may be engaging with a prior association between unicorns and extinction as old as Talmudic commentary on the story of the Noahic Flood, which explains that the colossal size of the animal prevented it from entering the ark, even if it could have been saved by other means (*Zevachim* 113b). The idea of unicorns no longer existing due to the Great Flood would later be popularized in such compositions as C. S. Lewis's 1948 poem from the humor magazine *Punch*, "The Sailing of the Ark," and Shel Silverstein's "The Unicorn Song," originally released in 1962 and notably recorded by the Irish Rovers in 1968. The text of the latter is printed under the title "The Unicorn" in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and ascribes the absence of unicorns from modernity to their lassitude in boarding Noah's Ark: "Ol' Noah looked out through the drivin' rain / but the Unicorns were hidin', playin' silly games. / They were kickin' and splashin' in the misty morn, / oh them silly Unicorn" (77). Edward Hoch's 1959 short story "The Last Unicorns" had earlier used the same premise, with the difference that the owner of a breeding pair of unicorns refuses to part with them. Lewis's poem predates the story and Silverstein's song, its conclusion being a punchline similar to both in that "the Ark must sail without the Unicorn," yet it treats the subject with considerably more gravity (124). Here the unicorn is a singular being that knocks on the door of the Ark, "Belated and unmated," although Noah's son Ham will not allow it inside before it flees (124). Anticipating Beagle's stabling of his own lost unicorns in the breakers of waves, Lewis's Noah praises the departing unicorn for its "neck wave-arched," and projects a future disenchanted world lacking unicorns, "dark and crooked all the roads in which our race will walk" (124). As Chap. 5 will explore with additional reference to the 1962 first draft of the novel, Beagle's unicorn must walk the hard road that humans have created, to their mutual sorrow.

Finally, we should not underestimate the impact on Beagle and other fantasy authors—and the contemporary image of the unicorn more generally—traceable to two sets of unicorn tapestries both dating to approximately 1500 and sometimes known as "The Hunt of the Unicorn" and "The Lady and the Unicorn," on display by the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the Cloisters in Manhattan and the Musée de Cluny in Paris, respectively. Unicorns commonly appear in medieval illustrations in

bestiary manuscripts and in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors, this lack of a consistent visual representation owing to discrepancies and confusions about whether they should appear more equine or more goatlike, or stranger still. The later tapestries—which both depict their unicorns as large, powerful, and graceful white horses with goat beards—have had a disproportionately large effect on twentieth-century understandings of the unicorn's appearance, possibly in part due to their comparative ease of access, particularly for American fantasy authors from New York such as Beagle, Theodore Sturgeon, and Samuel R. Delany. In Beagle's introduction to his series of poems "The Unicorn Tapestries," collected in *We Never Talk About My Brother*, he specifies that as a child he always loved going to see the tapestries at the Cloisters (185), and Kenneth Zahorski records that the tapestries provided "the primary models for the last unicorn" visually (40). The poems take the perspective of a young boy on the great hunt depicted in the sequence of seven tapestries, and restores the premodern maleness of "the wondrous prey," while also repeating some of the poetic hairsplitting from the opening chapter of *The Last Unicorn* concerning the creature's precise coloration: "He was not white as ivory, / or snow, or milk, as men declare, / but white as moonlight on the sea—/ oh, white as daisies! white as air!" (186). We will find other reminders that this poem's author has previously adopted a unicorn's own perspective: the boy twice wonders, "What must we look like to a unicorn?" (188). Of course, *The Last Unicorn* informs us that Beagle's unicorn at once loves to watch the curious progression of mortal lives, and becomes concerned by recent changes: "Generation after generation, wolves and rabbits alike, they hunted and loved and had children and died, and as the unicorn did none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them" (2); "[S]he knew beyond both hope and vanity that men had changed, and the world with them, because the unicorns were gone" (11). At the conclusion of the poems inspired by the tapestries, the boy comes to understand, along with the resurrected unicorn, "that nothing could hold him, not even death, / that no collars, no chains, no fences, as strong as they seem, / can hold a dream" (190). As Chap. 2 discussed in the context of how Beagle departs from a Tolkienian theology, Beagle does opt to grant immortality to the unicorn in his novel, but an immortality of a different nature from that in the poems and the tapestries that avoids the Christian allegory of the resurrection,

continuing a pattern of reconfiguring the unicorn and the fantastic itself according to his own inclinations.

It is Beagle's 1995 short story "Julie's Unicorn," with its own metafictional dimensions, that engages more closely (and directly) with that other famous set of unicorn tapestries: "The Cluny tapestries. *La Dame d la Licorne*" (*Mirror Kingdoms* 108). In the narrative, a diminutive unicorn emerges from a tapestry and finds itself in the familiar urban reality of Joe Farrell and Julie Tanikawa. The story's premise recalls a memorable visual from the 1982 Rankin/Bass adaptation of *The Last Unicorn*, the opening of which animates scenes from one of the "Hunt" tapestries, closely copying its distinctive style and bringing many of its specific static images to life in brief animation (in the film we also catch a glimpse of one of the tapestries in Haggard's castle). Tellingly, Julie comments to Joe that the unicorn exceeds the premodern religious allegory depicted in the tapestry in which it had been trapped: "As soon as I saw it, I knew it wasn't just a religious allegory, a piece of composition. I mean, yes, it was that, too, but it was real, I could tell" (106). Julie asserts the reality of the unicorn in the way that *The Last Unicorn* declares the harpy and the unicorn to be more "real" than the human characters: "[U]nder the shrunken sky there was nothing real but the two of them" (53). The unicorn transcends any individual narrative told about it: in the short story, then, Beagle and Julie have worked to liberate the unicorn from the domineering Christian allegory that has trapped it for hundreds of years: "There's nothing wrong with it that being out of that damn tapestry won't cure" (106). The challenge turns out to be weaving the unicorn back into the tapestry, restoring it to the tradition from which it came but now in a better, safer location, away from the "chivalrous" knight who had captured it and instead nestled in the comfort of its true home, "its sanctuary in the wood" (119), just as the young Peter S. Beagle indelibly placed a unicorn in the sanctuary of a "lilac wood" in 1962. In order to figure out the way to save the unicorn from the so-called Holy Hunt and find it a proper place in the great tapestry (which we can view as fantasy itself), Beagle's characters, inspired by the Cluny tapestries, light upon the idea of showing the listless unicorn itself in the mirror: "[I]t looked in your mirror until it remembered itself, and now it knows what it wants to do" (*Mirror Kingdoms* 109–110). The tapestry referenced in the story, which shows a unicorn gazing at itself in a mirror, provides the

perfect image for Beagle's metafictional fantasy, and the self-examining unicorn that is metafantasy will be the subject of the next chapter.

The moments in which *The Last Unicorn* refers to unicorn lore in fact contribute a great deal to its metafictional character; Schmendrick, speaking to a genuine unicorn, can even refer paradoxically to the "rhinoceros, which is where the whole silly myth got started" (148–149). Within the novel, Beagle makes several such direct references to the varying representations of the unicorn across premodern cultures in proto-zoological texts and otherwise, in fact permitting one of the would-be hunters who trespass in the unicorn's forest to mention Pliny by name in an early passage that also doubles as the first hint that we are reading a metafiction or a metafantasy rather than a self-consistent secondary-world fantasy: "Pliny describes the unicorn as being very ferocious, similar in the rest of its body to a horse, with the head of a deer, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a bear; a deep, bellowing voice, and a single black horn, two cubits in length. And the Chinese—" (4). The unicorn herself later alludes to such scenes of pomp as we see in the "Hunt of the Unicorn" tapestries—"I have been hunted with bells and banners in my time" (9)—and Schmendrick tells a story about his teacher Nikos interrupting a medieval unicorn hunt, complete with an entrapping maiden: "Once, in the woods, he beheld a unicorn sleeping with his head in the lap of a giggling virgin, while three hunters advanced with drawn bows to slay him for his horn" (58). This latter reference to a male unicorn reminds us, again, that Beagle's most significant departure from the tradition is to feminize the unicorn, displacing the masculinity and virility traditionally associated with the unicorn onto the contrary figure of the Red Bull, and also more broadly to suppress the eroticism and sexuality inherent in the unicorn's interactions with virgins and associations with stallion iconography.[10] It is true that, as the *Physiologus* makes clear, for medieval Christians the unicorn nominally symbolized both the sinless, sexless conception of Christ and the virginal Jesus of medieval theology himself; Chaucer's Wife of Bath affirms that "Crist was a mayde" (*The Canterbury Tales* III.139). But even many medieval depictions of unicorns play with eroticism. In some manuscript illustrations, for example, we can find the maiden baring her breasts (as in British Library, Additional MS 8785, folio 296r, a text of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's encyclopedic *De proprietatibus rerum*), or unclothed entirely (in both the Rochester Bestiary, British Library, Royal MS 12 F XIII, folio 10v; and Bodleian Library, MS. Douce

132, folio 70r, in Guillaume le Clerc's *Bestiaire*). Richard de Fournival, in his thirteenth-century *Bestiaire d'Amour*, maps the male courtly lover onto the unicorn, both bewitched by the beautiful maiden's scent, as we see elsewhere in troubadour lyric and the like (see Shepard 54–55). As Shepard writes plainly, "The connotations of the virgin-capture story are in fact definitely erotic" (50), and yet these are not the connotations Beagle has chosen to explore.

For Beagle to divert the sexuality inherent in the phallic image of the unicorn stallion subdued by a virgin is perhaps more surprising in light of the prior tradition and the author's overt infusion of sexuality into another tale of a supernatural female dating from around the same time, "Lila the Werewolf," published in 1971 in Terry Carr's anthology *New Worlds of Fantasy #3* (also collected in *Mirror Kingdoms*). Indeed, episodes with humans engaging in sexual intercourse with supernatural beings recur prominently in many of Beagle's later works, including *The Folk of the Air* and *Summerlong*, but "Lila and the Werewolf" becomes particularly explicit. In the story, Farrell discovers to his dismay that his new girlfriend Lila is a genuine urban werewolf; while this "hangup" eventually causes some relationship trouble, at first Farrell finds himself all the more sexually excited by her "wild, heavy zoo smells, warm and raw and fearful, the sweeter for being savage" (158). Her doctor hopes to psychoanalyze the affliction away—"Dr. Schechtman says it's a sex thing" (161)—and, as Jean Tobin points out, Farrell also experiences strong "sexual disgust" at Lila's later escapades with the neighborhood dogs ("Werewolves" 187).[11] Examples of twentieth-century authors of Beagle's own generation who have accentuated the sexuality in the image of the medieval unicorn include Samuel R. Delany ("The Unicorn Tapestries," 1970) and Angela Carter ("The Unicorn," 1963), as well as, earlier, even "Inkling" Charles Williams, whose 1938 poem "Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn" appears in his *Taliessin Through Logres*: "the quick panting unicorn; he will come / to a girl's crooked finger or the sharp smell / of her clear flesh" (5–7). Williams's poem attributes a sexual frustration to the unicorn—"the gruesome horn only to be / polished, its rifling rubbed between breasts" (14-15)—though the maiden achieves sexual satisfaction with the victorious hunter, after he has impaled the unicorn with one spear, and then her with another: "she lies with the gay hunter and his spear flesh-hued, / and over their couch the spoiled head displayed" (17–18). Louis Malle's 1975 surrealist film *Black*

Moon follows *The Last Unicorn* in using a female unicorn, but takes the form of a psychosexual fantasia throughout: Beagle's themes largely lie elsewhere.

Beagle's vision for the unicorn and its many meanings stands apart from these examples, even though Molly shouts down Schmendrick's attempt to associate the unicorn with "innocence and purity" (98). Counterintuitively, by de-emphasizing the unicorn as a symbol of chastity, the specter of sexuality itself retreats. The novel features a half-hearted virginity test, a piece of "silly business" during which a princess must call a unicorn before marriage; no one minds that the unicorns no longer come (101–103). Beagle's medievalizing world does not replicate medieval Christian attitudes toward sex, although, again, the unicorn—that untamable stallion attracted to young virgins with a phallic singular horn—was always an uneasy choice for the symbol of chastity it became. In the fifteenth-century allegory *The Assembly of Gods*, a personification of chastity rides a unicorn —"Next hym folowyd Chastyté, on an unycorn" (818)—but Shepard points out that, "So widely variable is symbolism of this kind […] that Leonardo da Vinci makes the animal a type of incontinence, or what he calls *Intemperanza*" (80). The unicorn's sexual charge and its associations with purity always existed in tension with one another, and in my reading Beagle is not terribly interested in either, unless the unicorn's purity stands for some purity of essence, beauty, or ideal. The eroticism that the virgin capture story sublimates becomes yet more deeply sublimated still in the chaste relationship between Amalthea and Prince Lír: "her horn glanced across Lír's chin as clumsily as a first kiss" (271).[12] Their mortal and immortal worlds are finally incommensurate, and cannot be breached through something as simple as sex, which Beagle leaves to the side in pursuit of other themes. The novel finally suggests that this feminized unicorn does not merely reverse the conventional stallion image, but may in some sense exist beyond gender or at least beyond binary gender: "[B]e slow to call that third male or female," warns Haggard in his bitterly earned wisdom (155).

The by-now-common depiction of the unicorn in genre fantasy as such a transcendent, immortal being also owes much to Beagle's attribution of this characteristic to unicorn, and the foregrounding of mortality and immortality as themes in his novel. The idea that a unicorn is an immortal creature, while not originating in Beagle, was certainly not a commonplace

until after his novel's release. In the premodern imaginary, as we have seen, a unicorn was simply an exotic beast on the order of a dragon, elephant, or lion, each one possessing unique biological characteristics and rich in powerful Christian symbolism. Certainly, the supposed curative powers of the horn—capable of cleansing water sources, and also possessing various pharmacological applications against poison and disease—could have lent the foundation to a view of the unicorn as associated with health, longevity, and even a supranatural immortality. Before Beagle, we can find a few obscure twentieth-century poems that connect the unicorn with immortality, as witnessed in the brief references in Samuel Hoffenstein's 1930 poem "The Stricken"—"The immortal unicorn keeps tryst / With our far and faithless spears" (34)—and Margaret Stanley-Wrench's 1949 poem "Tapestry": "O here must tread the immortal unicorn" (164). It is Richard Hughes's 1924 poem "Unicorn Mad" that makes the most of the creature's immortality, although in this poem the unicorn's eternal life more nearly resembles Schmendrick's cursed existence rather than Beagle's unicorn's changeless tranquility in her forest; the poem's refrain repeats, "Pity, pity poor Unicorn / That he cannot now die" (544). Immortality in the face of the death of all else drives Hughes's unicorn to madness, in direct contrast to Beagle's unicorn, who panics herself because she cannot tolerate the idea of living in a new mortal body that she can feel "rotting all around [her]" (150). This earlier unicorn has survived an icy apocalypse, and Hughes compares him to the image of the Wandering Jew; in the end we find the unicorn's immortal suffering ultimately "mocking human pain" (544).[13] For an earlier analog of the immortal unicorn, we could also point to John Dryden's 1687 poem *The Hind and the Panther*, which begins with the line, "A milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged." But after Beagle immortal unicorns proliferate, even if the unicorns that populate his own later works possess very different traits.

We have seen that, over the past two or three thousand years, few characteristics of the unicorn have proved "immortal and unchanged": Beagle's usage and departures from prior traditions demonstrate that the unicorn is above all malleable, what we make it, a symbol charged with meanings, but meanings that are not necessarily fixed in place. "We do not know what a unicorn is like," reads one of the epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter, a line from the 1951 essay by Jorge Luis Borges "Kafka and His Precursors" in the English translation by Eliot Weinberger (364).

Borges fittingly repeats the passage in his own neo-bestiary *The Book of Imaginary Beings* a few years later, and Brett Levinson has highlighted the characteristically Borgesian playfulness inherent in the multiple layers of translation at work in the surrounding passage, which contains a description of the qilin or Chinese unicorn, "according to the English translation of Borges's Spanish translation of Margouliès's French translation (and/or editing) of the Chinese ninth-century writer Han Yu" (53). Just as Beagle's unicorn goes unrecognized by most, Borges's highly mediated source warns that "we could be in the presence of a unicorn and not know with certainty that it is one" (363). This ancient idea, that a unicorn might walk among us unknown, captivated Borges, and Levinson glosses the literal sense of the statement to mean that, "if one encountered a Qilin, the encounter would be missed, for the appearance of the Qilin is unknown" (53), while also interpreting the image deconstructively as a commentary on language as well. Ultimately, Borges adduces the invisibly present unicorn in order to articulate his famously nonlinear point about literary history: "The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (365). Beagle has named some of the precursors of his unicorn—such as Dorothy P. Lathrop's 1941 children's novel about a young girl who discovers a white unicorn colt, *The Colt from Moon Mountain* (Tooker and Hofheins 5)—but more noteworthy is how his own unicorn represents a major inflection point in the history of unicorns and how they are perceived, these paradoxically unknowable yet well-known creatures. As the truism goes, everyone knows what a dinosaur, dragon, or unicorn looks like, without ever having seen one, and the popularity of Beagle's particular fixing in place of the unicorn's image is one of the reasons why this is so.

Chasing the Butterfly: An Annotated Guide to the Allusions

In some sense *The Last Unicorn* seems obsessed with precursors, and nowhere is Beagle's own prior reading more on display than in the unicorn's baffled exchanges with the butterfly. Many scholars have made much of this episode without feeling any obligation to chase down every last allusion, and David Van Becker, for one, has suggested that "his

jumbled quotations refer to places and times outside the fantasy context and jar the reader into a complex participation in the fiction" (54). Over a decade ago, Stevens noted that a compendium of authorial annotations for the butterfly episode was intended to appear with one of Beagle's many still unrealized projects: "A complete guide to the butterfly's allusions will be contained in *The First Last Unicorn and Other Beginnings*, due from Conlan Press in 2012" (*Beyond Horatio's Philosophy* 22). Such a document may be forthcoming someday, and in any event a comprehensive guide to the references would be impossible to construct without Beagle's own assistance: some are private jokes. But, because to my knowledge no other such guide yet exists in English, I will conclude this chapter on Beagle's antecedents by attempting a partial catalog of the butterfly's references, with only a brief commentary on selected allusions.[14] What follows will devote one paragraph to each of the paragraphs in the episode (which runs from pages 12–16), and it is also worth noting that the 1962 draft of the novel published as *The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* uses a considerably different but still overlapping set of references, with a greater number appearing to be inside jokes to my eye, and also a greater number pulled from very contemporary headlines, for example, "in asking ourselves what lies ahead for the Cambodians" (29). As such, I will not include commentary on these older, excised allusions, and concentrate on the published "canon" of quotations that provides the foundation of what I have referred to as Beagle's literary mythology. In Norford's reading, "[t]he butterfly episode suggests that poetry is found in the ruins of time, in the meanest of lives, something the unicorn is as yet unable to appreciate" (94), and fittingly this idiosyncratic constellation includes references to musical theater, folk songs, advertising copy, and some that only one other person may have ever understood, creating a tension in any such literary mythology between an individual's very personal and private individual reading and that body of collective knowledge and memory represented in "familiar quotations" and verses.

The butterfly introduces himself with reference to an American folk song as a "roving gambler," very appropriately for Beagle, who concludes his novel with an invented folk song; variants of "The Roving Gambler" have been recorded by such artists as Burl Ives, the Everly Brothers, Simon & Garfunkel, and Bob Dylan, and it was included by Carl Sandburg in his 1927 collection *The American Songbag* (12). The next reference—"Death

takes what man would keep”—paraphrases lines from William Butler Yeats’s late poem “John Kinsella’s Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore” and already confirms that the butterfly has flown as far afield as the twentieth century (12). A famous line from the ravings of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* follows—“Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks” (3.2)—likely establishing the “madness” of the butterfly as much as his literacy, and also suggests an apocalyptic undertone concordant with the near-extinction of the unicorn’s kind, about which she is quickly to learn about from the butterfly (12). Although the effect of the pastiching and remixing is already becoming comical, the next line—“I warm my hands before the fire of life”—also has a rather funereal context, originating in Walter Savage Landor’s nineteenth-century epitaph poem “Dying Speech of an Old Philosopher” (12). Even though the phrase becomes tangled up with a contemporary advertising refrain promising “four-way relief,” the second line from Landor’s poem provides a fair summation of some of the main themes of *The Last Unicorn*: “Nature I loved, and, next to nature, Art” (41).[15]

In answer to the unicorn’s subsequent question inquiring if he knows what she is, the butterfly replies with a bit of nonsense from Hamlet’s feigned madness—“Excellent well, you’re a fishmonger”—suggesting that there may be a method to the butterfly’s own apparent madness (12, *Hamlet* 2.2).[16] After this second Shakespeare reference come additional lines from popular songs—“You’re my everything, you are my sunshine”—and then more Yeats (“old and gray and full of sleep”), falling into a combinatory pattern of high and low, old and new, and ending with a scrap of another popular song, “my pickle-face, consumptive Mary Jane” (12).[17] The paragraph concludes with a linkage of Edmond Rostand’s nineteenth-century French play *Cyrano de Bergerac* (III.6)—“Your name is a golden bell hung in my heart”—and the final line of Stephen Vincent Benét’s poem “Nomenclature”: “I would break my body to pieces to call you once by your name” (12).

When the butterfly playfully declares that the unicorn’s name is “Rumpelstiltskin” in response to her increasingly agitated questioning, the reference is of course to the motif of the concealed name in the fairy tale, gesturing to both the importance of names and identity later in the narrative when the unicorn becomes Amalthea and the form of the novel itself: “Haven’t you ever been in a fairy tale before?” (127). In an interview included with the IDW graphic novel version of *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle

has explicated the next line—"You don't get no medal"—as "the punch line of a mildly dirty joke about Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip" (157). Musical references begin to take over, with quick nods to the popular songs "Bill Bailey" and "Buckle Down, Winsocki," the intervening phrase "where once he could not go" likely detached from Joan Baez's rendition of "Once I Knew a Pretty Girl," or some other version, which Beagle describes in the IDW interview as "a phrase from a beautiful old folk song that Phil and his girlfriend Joan used to sing together" (157). The further instruction to Winsocki to "go and catch a falling star" again serves as a humorous disjunction, but also affirms the continuity of "song" across time and across so-called popular and serious registers, through its appeal to the canonical English poet John Donne's simply titled composition "Song," which itself resembles nonsense verse in its initial series of *impossibilia*: "Go and catch a falling star, / Get with child a mandrake root" (1–2). As if reminded by Donne, the butterfly makes a swerve toward the canon, next joining pieces of A. E. Housman's poetry collection *A Shropsire Lad* and Christoper Marlowe's Elizabethan tragedy *Doctor Faustus*: "Clay lies still […] kill-devil all the parish over" (13).

But then just as quickly we are back to the most elemental of popular songs, a nursery rhyme and children's game, with the chant of "One, two, three o'lairy" (13). A stream-of-consciousness fugue commences, with an allusion to Gerard Manley Hopkins's weighty "Carrion Comfort" abutting another piece of a song in "look down that lonesome road," and then Shakespeare returns: "what damned minutes tells he o'er who dotes, yet doubts" (*Othello* 3.3). The next sentence is a tripartite welding, first of John Milton likely via Robert Graves—"Hasten, Mirth, and bring with thee"—and then a scrap of the anonymous "Tom o' Bedlam" poem that resurfaces in *The Folk of the Air* ("a host of furious fancies whereof I am commander"), with a dash of contemporary consumer capitalism now added to the Bedlamite's madness: "which will be on sale for three days only at bargain summer prices."[18] The next sentence fuses several repetitions, including Joseph Conrad's "the horror, the horror" from *Heart of Darkness*; Shakespeare's "aroint thee, witch, aroint thee" (*Macbeth* 1.3), a detour to the Rikki-Tikki-Tavi episode from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* with "indeed and truly you've chosen a bad place to be lame in"; and, finally, back to *Othello* with Desdemona's willow song "willow,

willow, willow" (4.3), itself part of a song nested within a larger narrative (13).

The butterfly bids the unicorn farewell with a matter-of-fact reference to modern public transit, "I must take the A train" (and likely also to Duke Ellington), again signaling that, like T. H. White's Merlyn, he functions as a kind of traveler from the future. Before departing, of course, the butterfly rummages in his mind and comes up with the word "unicorn" and also a lucid dictionary entry, complete with some etymology, that pleases the unicorn even though the definition declares her "a fabulous animal" (14).[19] The scholastic tone of the lexicon is, naturally, undercut at once by some vaudevillian additions, incongruous references to W. S. Gilbert's "The Yarn of the Nancy Bell" ("I am a cook and a captain bold and the mate of the *Nancy* brig") and the full title of an old music hall number, "Has anybody here seen Kelly?" (14).[20]

The next paragraph's opening—"Butterfly, butterfly, where shall I hide?"—may evade explanation as a specific lyrical reference, although it scans similarly to the nursery rhyme line, "Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home"; the substantial differences make the identification difficult to assert confidently (15).[21] Shortly we return to familiar territory, however, as *King Lear* appears once again—and not for the last time in the novel—with the line "The sweet and bitter fool will presently appear" (1.4). The next sentence—"Christ, that my love were in my arms, and I in my bed again"—modernizes the early English of the sixteenth-century song "Westron Wynde" or "Western Wind," although the butterfly could have encountered its echoes in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* or Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and therefore offer us a quotation of a quotation (15).

The beginning of the butterfly's explanation of where the other unicorns may be found first quotes the conclusion of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Eldorado"—"Over the mountains of the moon"—although he cuts himself off and instead begins to hold forth more sensically on the Red Bull, and in a "strange voice" that seems to indicate that temporarily he no longer speaks in a tissue of quotations (15). This preliminary explanation about the Red Bull's corralling of her people is cut short by the phrase "Let nothing you dismay," the second line of the traditional Christmas carol "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," and then the warning "but don't be half-safe," an advertising slogan for the deodorant Arrid in the 1950s: the butterfly has lost the thread (15). Attempting to get back on track to expound the

significance of the Red Bull, the butterfly shakes off the repeated phrase "Follow me down"—which could derive from a number of traditional song lyrics ("Follow me down to Carlow," "Follow me down to Jordan's stream," and so on), and turns to the passage about the "re'em" from Deuteronomy 33:17: "His firstling bull has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he shall push the peoples, all of them, to the ends of the earth" (15).

As if having given away too much or simply having spoken too lucidly, in response to the unicorn's requests for clarification about the nature of Red Bull and the location of her people, the butterfly retreats into a final tour de force of combinatorial quotations. The initial reply—"I have nightmares about crawling around on the ground"—may uniquely reflect the butterfly's recollections of having once been a caterpillar, but the next line is another *King Lear* encore: "The little dogs, Tray, Blanche, Sue, they bark at me" (16). Here, however, we see the name "Sue" exchanged for Shakespeare's "Sweetheart" (3.6), and what seems like a parallel line from the same source—"the little snakes, they hiss at me"—instead recollects Kipling's poem "The Last Rhyme of True Thomas" (16). Another nursery rhyme, "Hark, Hark, the Dogs Do Bark," is the origin of the line "the beggars are coming to town," and the final allusion comes from the domain of musical theater: "Then at last come the clams" (16). This absurd valediction derives from the song "This Was A Real Nice Clambake" from Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1945 musical *Carousel*, and signifies in its very absurdity and frivolity that the butterfly can no longer provide useful information or communicate seriously. His parting words seem simply to play on the six limbs of insects: "It's you or me, moth! Hand to hand to hand to hand to hand" (16). Absorbed in his private intra-lepidopteran feud and no longer even sharing the lyrics he has gathered in his travels, these silly jokes mark the end of their encounter, and the unicorn is left frustrated with partial information and what seems to be a great deal of additional noise.[22]

Not all of the butterfly's soundbites appear to extend or comment on the novel's themes, seeming quite randomly selected; many others cut directly to its heart. In the paragraph that follows on his departure into the night, the unicorn vacillates about what their conversation might mean: "At least he did recognize me, she thought sadly. That means something. But she answered herself, No, that means nothing at all, except that somebody once

made up a song about unicorns, or a poem. But the Red Bull. What could he have meant by that? Another song, I suppose" (16). Beagle, through the butterfly, invites us to consider the extent to which we can recognize ourselves and our present circumstances in old songs and stories, as the unicorn wonders whether she has learned anything at all by listening to his personal repertoire of fragments. As he identifies himself with the butterfly, Beagle's other authorial alter ego Joe Farrell self-describes in *The Folk of the Air* as "junkman of the lost, curator of the truly useless, random cherisher, keeper, keener" (133). Are the butterfly's—the author's—lines repositories of truth and beauty, or are they "truly useless," just songs, mere combinations of words that mean nothing to no one? *The Last Unicorn* pursues the answer to such questions chiefly via the path of self-referentiality and self-reflection, and it is to Beagle's use of metafiction and humor in the novel that we will now turn.

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Footnotes

1 Carpenter elaborates on how Lewis's fiction fell short for Tolkien: "*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* offended against all these notions. It had been hastily written, and this haste seemed to suggest that Lewis was not taking the business of 'sub-creation' with what Tolkien regarded as proper seriousness. There were inconsistencies and loose ends in the story, while beyond the immediate demands of the plot the task of making Narnia seem 'real' did not appear to interest Lewis at all. Moreover, the story borrowed so indiscriminately from other mythologies and narratives (fauns, nymphs, Father Christmas, talking animals, anything that seemed useful for the plot) that for Tolkien the suspension of disbelief, the entering into a secondary world, was simply impossible" (224). Joe Christopher has questioned this straightforward assessment in an essay that nuances the question of why exactly Tolkien may have reacted with such antipathy to Narnia, reframing Carpenter's assessments as interpretations rather than facts as such; see his "J. R. R. Tolkien, Narnian Exile."

2 Beagle has admitted that his Midnight Carnival was likely an unconscious repurposing of the premise in Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (1935), which features a traveling show replete with mythological creatures (Tobin, "Introduction" xxi).

3 Cully is also the name of a mad hawk in T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* who speaks in quotations Shakespearean and otherwise, and would seem a closer counterpart to Beagle's butterfly than the reputation-obsessed outlaw Captain Cully. White's Cully is a ranking colonel among birds, however, and Beagle's Cully also loves to recite ballads, even, as Molly notes, "if [he] did write them all [himself]" (83).

4 John Pennington invites us to see the novel "as encompassing contradictory 'visions' not unlike Blake's cosmos" (11), and Zahorski observes a "contrapuntal structural pattern characteristic of musical compositions" matching such opposites and contraries in the novel (45), the Red Bull's appearance and the unicorn's transformation in the eighth chapter acting as fulcrum. Binary oppositions multiply in the novel, although of course, as Schmendrick observes of the binary that is a dilemma, which by definition should have two horns, perhaps "[t]hey never have just two" (150).

5 To Beagle's credit, although he broke his many vows never to return to unicorns due to a desire not to repeat himself, each of his unicorns proves very different from his last. For instance, *The Unicorn Sonata* is a short portal fantasy about a 13-year-old girl who enters a world inhabited by intelligent unicorns capable of changing into human shape (and back) of their own volition, although with certain consequences. As with so many of Beagle's works, music runs through the book, along with his recurrent themes of memory, mortality, and aging, but these unicorns are not the same beings that we find in *The Last Unicorn*. While the book achieved only modest success, it boasts impressive marketing blurbs, for example from Madeleine L'Engle, Poul Anderson, Ellen Kushner, and even celebrity stage magician David Copperfield, the latter of which can probably be explained as a connection facilitated by their mutual collaborator Janet Berliner, who in 1995 also co-edited the

anthology *David Copperfield's Tales of the Impossible*, and in the following year *David Copperfield's Beyond Imagination*.

6 Readers interested in comparing different descriptions and images from across the vast collection of surviving bestiary manuscripts can consult the resources compiled by David Badke as a part of his online bestiary project. An image gallery featuring dozens of medieval unicorns, for example, can be found here: https://bestiary.ca/beasts/beastgallery140.htm.

7 Beagle's 2017 story "My Son Heydari and the Karkadann" does culminate in a battle between an elephant and a wilder, fiercer Middle Eastern version of the unicorn, a battle in which the (tame) elephant is victorious.

8 Tolkien may have been more on Beagle's mind in 1962 when he included this depressed, dispossessed dragon who "sniffle[s] like a distant hurricane" (5), a far cry from—or perhaps not so far a cry from—"Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities," himself twice compared to a hurricane in *The Hobbit* (234).

9 A unicorn duels an elephant and another faces down a lion in the margins of the Queen Mary Psalter (British Library, Royal MS 2 B VII, on folios 100v and 190v, respectively); this manuscript is known for its many unusual illustrations of so-called grotesques or hybrid creatures. The unicorn also became paired as an enemy of the lion in a tradition distinct from the bestiaries which held that the latter would leap out of the way of the unicorn's charge, causing its horn to become stuck in a tree, as referenced for example in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (II.5.10) and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (2.1). The wily hero of the Grimms' fairy tale "The Brave Little Tailor" uses the same stratagem against a unicorn. White understands these allusions as representing a misprision of the bestiary's description of the antelope, which can only be caught when its horns become entangled in a shrub (18n1).

10 The medieval guide for anchoresses known as the *Ancrene Wisse* contains a line that compares men to unicorns in a very gendered way: "Wummon wrath is wulvene; mon, wulf other liun other unicorne" [Woman in anger is a she-wolf; man, wolf or lion or unicorn]" (3.29, my translation).

11 This movement toward sexual disgust disturbs Ina Rae Hark: "The misogyny that seems to underlie this episode, particularly the equation of female sexuality with bloodlust—the lycanthropy developed at the onset of puberty—is puzzling in an author who gives redemptive significance to love relationships and excels in creating sensitive, nonstereotyped portraits of his female characters" (533). Beagle has elsewhere described a misogynistic and limited view of women as "an attitude that has crippled nearly all of our greatest writers" ("Foreword to *Evening Song*" 12), and Hark adds,

“Beagle himself admits that since a critic pointed out the implications of the story to him, it has made him a bit nervous about his subconscious motivations in writing it” (533).

12 For a different perspective on the role of sex and sexuality in the novel, see Weronica Łaszkiewicz’s essay “Peter S. Beagle’s Transformations of the Mythic Unicorn,” which, beyond tracking “the degree to which Beagle’s works […] eliminate, reduce, condense, or transpose elements of the traditional unicorn mythos” (54), argues “that innocence and experience—understood as referring to human sexuality—are one of the main themes of *The Last Unicorn* and the cause of Beagle’s alterations of the traditional unicorn mythos” (57). Crucial to this reading is an understanding of Amalthea’s becoming the maiden of the capture narrative: “No longer is the unicorn approached by a maiden: the unicorn becomes the maiden, so two images—of beast and virgin—are condensed into one” (57).

13 It is certainly possible that Beagle himself knew the poem “Unicorn Mad,” especially because Louis Untermeyer, one of his early literary mentors, was sufficiently familiar with the poem to have asked Hughes for permission to include it in the third edition of his *Modern British Poetry* (Baden 155). Beagle’s 1978 compendium *The Fantasy Worlds of Peter Beagle* is dedicated to the memory of the recently deceased Untermeyer and the writer Edgar Pangborn, after whose death he had earlier written a commemoration published in *Locus*.

14 A Japanese edition of *The Last Unicorn* with Japanese-language annotations by Makoto Kuroda has been published, and he has made the annotations for the butterfly scene available online, which identify the source of most but not all of the references: https://www.academia.edu/8017701/Annotated_Last_Unicorn.

15 The full text of the four-line poem appears in a 1970 appreciation of Landor by Louis Untermeyer, a name that will keep coming up when one researches Beagle, again raising the possibility that Untermeyer acquainted Beagle with the poem; Landor is far less obscure a poet than Richard Hughes, however. Also, I have discovered an advertisement for “Rexall Bisma-Rex for acid indigestion” that promises “four-way relief” in the April 9, 1956, issue of *Life* magazine, although Beagle and his butterfly could have encountered the phrase in any number of such ads (149). A Philip K. Dick novel from the same decade as Beagle’s novel, *Dr. Bloodmoney*, also appears to connect four-way relief with indigestion: “I have this funny pain brought on by over-indulgence . . . what I need is four-way relief, don’t you agree?” (119).

16 Across the novel, Beagle quotes most commonly from *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, high tragedies about death and despair raised to apocalyptic heights, but often in comedic contexts. Schmendrick, for example, will later allude to Hamlet’s first suicidal soliloquy (*Hamlet* 1.2)—“How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to you all the uses of this world!” (163)—in a tacky sales pitch that ends, “Get a magician today!” (164).

17 Mary Jane's physical characteristics—and even her name—differ from version to version of this song, known variously as "She Promised to Meet Me When the Clock Struck Seventeen" or "The Hungry Hash House." A version collected by Dick Best under the title "She Promised to Meet Me" in 1964 contains the precise line the butterfly uses (48).

18 The butterfly's words closely but not perfectly match a line from Milton's poem "L'Allegro," and appear instead to originate in Robert Graves's tongue-in-cheek rewriting of Milton to retrace the process of composition in his 1957 essay "John Milton Muddles Through." The "Tom o' Bedlam" poem lent *The Folk of the Air* its discarded first title, *The Knight of Ghosts and Shadows*, and at one point the protagonist Joe Farrell quotes the same excerpt that the butterfly has memorized (93).

19 The butterfly prefaces the unexpected dictionary definition recognizing the unicorn as a unicorn by "absent-mindedly" uttering the enigmatic line "They ride that horse you call the Macedonai," which has eluded my attempts to track down its referent (14). Philip II of Macedon was the father of Alexander the Great, and the name "Philip" means "lover of horses"; Alexander the Great also rode a famous (implicitly Macedonian) horse named Bucephalus. Otherwise, I have found no satisfactory explanation for this reference.

20 The butterfly could also have picked up the line "Has anybody here seen Kelly?" from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which references the song in the sixth chapter ("Hades").

21 This possibility was suggested to me by Thomas Tyrrell.

22 The butterfly scene in 1982 animated adaptation of the novel retains several of the allusions, and in fact adds a tremendous number of new ones, chiefly to popular music. In order, these new references include the following list. An early radio program called *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy* is the source for the fight song "Wave the flag for Hudson High, boys, / Show them how we stand," which in the film even precedes the novel's introductory line "I am a roving gambler." Irving Berlin's "How Deep Is the Ocean?"—a song later recorded by Bing Crosby, Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra, and many others—provides the lines "How far would I travel / To be where you are?". The butterfly also recites the chant from the traditional children's game "Red Rover"; invokes the title of the nineteenth-century song "My Wild Irish Rose"; recites lines from the nursery rhyme "The Muffin Man"; sings a bit of "One Alone" from the 1926 operetta *The Desert Song*; references "See You Later, Alligator" by Bobby Charles; cautions the unicorn, "Close cover before striking," a familiar consumer warning on older matchbooks; sings some of Sidney Bechet's "Hold Tight"; and concludes in parting with a scrap of the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence." While several lines of the canonical poetry from the novel remain, these many new additions heavily skew

the scene toward musical references, appropriately enough for the audiovisual medium and for a children’s musical film in particular.

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4. Metafiction and Metafantasy: Comic Fantasy as Mirror for the Genre

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Abstract
The Last Unicorn departs from many other classic fantasy novels in its distinctive sense of humor and frequent use of metafictional devices such as anachronism. This chapter analyzes the relationship between comedy and metafiction in the novel, and above all how Beagle has produced a metafantasy that comments on fantasy as a form. While Tolkien forbids in true fantasy the kind of mockery of magic in which Beagle indulges, we see Beagle ultimately arriving at a similar theory of fantasy's power from another direction. Through the artist figure of Schmendrick and other narrative strategies, Beagle's metafantasy foregrounds the applicability of fantasy to reality, and of art and story, to the world.

Keywords Metafantasy – Metafiction – Comedy – Terry Pratchett – Magic – Self-reflexivity – Humor

Incompatible Bedfellows? Humor and High Fantasy

What is perhaps most remarkable about *The Last Unicorn*, with the hindsight of more than five decades, is how its self-parodic dimensions

appear to anticipate the entire history of the commercial fantasy genre to follow, with all of the Tolkien epigones and the endless quests upon quests for this or that treasure or other objective looted from myth and fairy tale: in 1968, Prince Lír has already "long since lost count of the witches in the thorny woods, the giants, the demons disguised as damsels; the glass hills, fatal riddles, and terrible tasks; the magic apples, rings, lamps, potions, swords, cloaks, boots" (177–178). Curiously, following Borges's way of thinking in "Kafka and His Precursors," Beagle seems to have created precursors in his future rather than in his past, poking fun at all the standard fantasy clichés before they had become clichés. Although he could not have foreseen the deluge of genre fantasy to come, writing about a decade before the proverbial dam would break in the late 1970s, Beagle's novel functions as a proleptic, almost prophetic commentary on—and to some extent critique of—formulaic narratives set in what Terry Pratchett so usefully christened in 1985 "the consensus fantasy universe" ("Why Gandalf Never Married"), or simply "Fantasyland" (341), as both John Clute and John Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* and Diana Wynne Jones's satirical *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* name it. Readers and players of fantasy works will recognize this consensus fantasy universe immediately, the medievalizing product of the convergence of Tolkienian fantasy and an earlier lineage of American sword and sorcery, tempered in both the endless churn of fresh fantasy paperbacks and the new game spaces spawned by *Dungeons & Dragons* and its successors in the 1970s. Maureen Kincaid Speller has written that, to a reader of such secondary-world fantasies set in this familiar sort of place, Beagle's novel can be "intensely shocking because it so readily subverts the conventions of the high fantasy novel" (10). High fantasy willing to undercut itself with humor continues to be rare, and *The Last Unicorn* remains one of the more notable comic fantasies outside of Pratchett's own satirical corpus, and in certain respects resembles, in a compressed form, what Pratchett's Discworld would later become. Of course, in comparison with Beagle writing in the early 1960s, Pratchett had at least an additional decade and a half of high fantasy to spur his parodic imagination before releasing the first of his Discworld novels, *The Color of Magic*, in 1983. Pratchett's comic metafantasies look back across the recent spate of mass-market fantasy, while Beagle could only look to Tolkien and the same traditional material that would furnish the genre's well-worn plots and overfamiliar characters. For all of their playfulness and mockery,

neither Pratchett nor Beagle ultimately rejects those plots and character archetypes, never sacrificing the earnestness at the foundation of high fantasy, and collectively the humor in the novel may be less light than it might appear.

Chapter 2 documents the many affinities uniting Beagle and Tolkien as fantasists, but it must be admitted that *The Last Unicorn* most diverges from the Tolkienian model for fantasy in Beagle's use of both humor and metafiction—themselves not unrelated for Beagle—and this chapter will better contextualize the author in the traditions of comic fantasy and metafantasy, forms that have likely achieved their most sustained expression in Pratchett's work. Scholars have brought a range of theoretical and philosophical frameworks to *The Last Unicorn* and its humor in particular, and Beagle produces an implicit theory of fantasy of his own via his metafiction, counterintuitively a theory of fantasy that arrives at many of the same conclusions as Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" by other means. It is true that Beagle's own commentary on his use of humor has been somewhat more straightforward; for example, he has explained humor as a strategy of addressing the serious in a more palatable form: "I identify immediately with a song by Gilbert and Sullivan, the operetta 'The Yeomen of the Guard,' where the wandering jester explains that 'He who'd make his fellow creatures wise must always gild the philosophic pill.' Make 'em laugh and it slides right down" (Broughton 153). Certainly, Beagle's humor always reads as a strategy, and a very careful one that serves larger purposes.

Beagle was far from the first writer to mix comedy and the unicorn, although using unicorns to humorous effect became far more commonplace after his novel. Two of the most well-known such unicorns deployed by humorists are surely Lewis Carroll's in *Through the Looking-Glass*, and the one glimpsed in James Thurber's 1939 story "The Unicorn in the Garden." A text as old and unlikely as John Lydgate's fifteenth-century English version of *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* can also invoke the unicorn's ferocity while playfully connecting the majestic beast with drunkenness and a common drinking horn rather than its own mystical healing horn: "And whan with wyn ful ys myn horn, / I am ffers as an vnycorn" ["And when with wine full is my horn / I am as fierce as a unicorn" (13023–13024, my translation). After Beagle, humorous unicorns number too many to list, and, unsurprisingly, the unicorn becomes an object of comic deflation in

Pratchett's Discworld books, commensurate with the almost-sanctimonious reverence with which fantasy novels so often treat them, as in the following exchange from *The Wee Free Men*:

> "There really is a school for witches?" said Tiffany.
>
> "In a manner of speaking, yes," said Miss Tick. […]
>
> "Can I go there by magic? Does, like, a unicorn turn up to carry me there or something?"
>
> "Why should it? A unicorn is nothing more than a big horse that comes to a point, anyway. Nothing to get so excited about," said Miss Tick. (48–49)

In Pratchett's novel *Lords and Ladies*, which positions elves or fairies as dangerous foes, a unicorn serves the inimical fairy queen and proves murderously violent until finally tamed by a scheme of Granny Weatherwax: "'Shoeing the unicorn,' said Nanny, shaking her head. 'Only you'd think of shoeing a unicorn, Esme.' 'I've been doing it all my life,' said Granny" (279). Despite the irreverent mockery of unicorns implicit in Pratchett's attributing, for example, a nasty stench to the killer unicorn, Pratchett preserves an aura of the numinous surrounding them, in that "shoeing the unicorn" becomes a kind of idiom for daring and achieving the impossible.

Similarly, while *The Last Unicorn* largely retains a reverential respect for the unicorn around which it turns, on at least two occasions Beagle directs our attention to the potential absurdity of even this majestic magical creature: "[E]ven Molly, who loved her, could not keep from seeing that a unicorn is an absurd animal when the shining has gone out of her" (139); "It would make no difference to you if I had changed you into a rhinoceros, which is where the whole silly myth got started" (148–149). Beagle has intricately constructed a novel that can simultaneously believe and not believe in unicorns: Schmendrick can paradoxically dismiss the being he elsewhere calls his "last chance" at happiness and a meaningful life as a "silly myth" (40), and almost 30 years later Beagle would refer in a nonfiction piece to "this old, foolish, lovely dream of the unicorn" (*Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn* xiv). In other words, the novel does not believe in the literal reality of unicorns, but believes in the power of their very unreality as myth, stories with no end that orient us to the world. As in the

phenomenon of multistable perception, fantasy matters and does not matter, unicorns mean and do not mean, and Beagle takes care never to allow his mockery to render a judgment on fantasy as meaningless; on some fundamental level beneath the jokes, the form continues to matter and mean. As the novel informs us early on, only a "gay and reverent manner" is "proper to the pursuit of a unicorn," and Beagle pursues his unicorn with both reverence and a light heart (10–11).

Multiple studies appraising Beagle's humor exist, although it has also proved controversial, generating negative critical responses as well. Jean Tobin introduces her own appreciation of Beagle's "funny fantasy" with the observation that "humor is seldom considered a prime characteristic of fantasy" ("A Myth" 19), and David Stevens likewise opines that, "While humor is peripheral to much fantasy, it is central to Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*" ("Incongruity" 230).[1] Whereas Stevens and Tobin mainly seek to document and classify numerous comic strategies, Roger C. Schlobin comments in a more circumspect fashion on the jester or fool as a character type, briefly considering both Schmendrick and the butterfly as manifestations of the fool alongside several other examples from contemporary texts: "[T]he fool has been alive and well in examples of heroic or sword-and-sorcery fantasy for some time now. He is still uncommon, for heroic fantasy's roots in saga, epic, and romance give it a predominantly solemn tone—inhospitable to the fool" (124).[2] To Schlobin's account I would add that Schmendrick's affinities with the fool perhaps explain Beagle's high number of allusions throughout the novel to *King Lear* in particular, the play that features the most quintessential Shakespearean fool. Schlobin finds much fantasy hostile to this figure, and these three scholars all gesture, not inaccurately, to a commonly held assumption that so-called high fantasy should retain a high seriousness, the solemnity of a Tolkien in *The Silmarillion*. When Norman Stein writes in his 1968 review of *The Last Unicorn* that "[c]ertainly Beagle's sense of humor is subversive to the genre" (97), the statement is not intended as a compliment. Indeed, objections to the role of Beagle's humor in the novel seem to lie at the root of Brian Attebery's original criticisms of *The Last Unicorn* in *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*. Attebery recognizes the novel as "a literary homage" to Tolkien, but he judges the "low-key satire" of Beagle's work "completely foreign to Tolkien's fantasy" (158): "Fantasy is not like parlor conjuring; its effects do not arise from

misdirection and patter" (159). *The Hobbit* and even *The Lord of the Rings* contain considerable quantities of light humor, despite Tolkien's reputation for seriousness, but here Attebery seems to have in mind just the kind of breach of a fantasy decorum that Tolkien himself warns against in "On Fairy-stories," if we understand that document as an *ars poetica* or *ars fantastica*, a guide to creating good fantasy: never mock the magic.

Tolkien's definition of a "fairy-story" or fantasy does not exclude humor as such, but it strictly forbids rendering anything about the tale's fantastical machinery risible: "There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away. Of this seriousness the medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an admirable example" (33).

From one point of view, Beagle violates this major dictum, in addition to how we might fault him for failing to sustain a hermetic secondary world that could "command Secondary Belief":

> Fantasy thus, too often, remains undeveloped; it is and has been used frivolously, or only half-seriously, or merely for decoration: it remains merely "fanciful." Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough— though it may already be a more potent thing than many a "thumbnail sketch" or "transcript of life" that receives literary praise. (61)

The great task of the fantasist, for Tolkien, is "[t]o make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief" (61), rather than merely comical.

Before we move on to consider Beagle's idiosyncratically metafictive worldbuilding in relation to Tolkien's conception of subcreation and the secondary world, the question of whether or not Beagle violates Tolkien's key injunction against making fun of magic itself may itself remain open to debate. *The Last Unicorn* imagines qualitatively different kinds of magic, "real magic" differentiated from the lesser forms practiced by both Mommy Fortuna and Schmendrick, in spite of his best efforts (38). What Schmendrick considers mere tricks may not seem to differ ontologically from this "real" magic, in that they still violate the laws of nature as we

know them in extreme ways: “He made an entire sow out of a sow’s ear; turned a sermon into a stone, a glass of water into a handful of water, a five of spades into a twelve of spades, and a rabbit into a goldfish that drowned. […] Once he changed a dead rose into a seed. The unicorn liked that, even though it did turn out to be a radish seed” (42). The unicorn may admire the transformation of the dead rose into a radish seed because it foreshadows the restorative return of spring to Haggard’s kingdom that accompanies the freeing of the unicorns: here is power over life and death, even if a comic deflation disguises its fundamental seriousness. Finally, Schmendrick proves equally disgusted with his inability to free the unicorn from her cage of iron bars by magic, even though, again, the spells that he attempts do succeed in acting on the world with supernatural power despite their inefficacy in solving the problem at hand: “I must have gotten the accent wrong” (45). As we can see, Beagle surely mocks his magician mercilessly —Molly Grue angrily pronounces him an “idiot” when he celebrates a little too riotously at having succeeded in working genuine magic to transform the unicorn (145)—but arguably never mocks the magic itself, at least not the kind of “true magic” that is Schmendrick’s grail (96). For Beagle, magic is meaning, and treating as sacrosanct this real or true magic would appear to align well enough with Tolkien’s interdiction against comedy in fantasy, and it is likely Beagle’s habit of making light of his setting and his use of metafictional violations of the world’s consistency for humorous ends that move the novel farther from Tolkien’s vision for the form.

Some commentators describe *The Last Unicorn* as taking place in a Tolkienian secondary world, but Beagle’s humor relies on anachronism and references to the real world that disrupt immersion in the fantasy world as world. For instance, in their *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski, and Robert H. Boyer uncomplicatedly frame *The Last Unicorn* as “set in a medieval secondary world” (51), but they must necessarily be defining “secondary world” in an unusual way, if a secondary world ostensibly distinct from our own can include Arabian horses, China, and so many other aspects of our world’s geography and history up through the twentieth century; the same authors also—idiosyncratically but consistently—define the New York City cemetery in *A Fine and Private Place* as a secondary world within our world (50). More persuasive is the assessment of Rabanus Mitterecker, who observes that in this “postmodern fairytale” (158), “the world itself […]

notably, bears no name": "Instead, Beagle blurs the lines between primary and secondary world" (160). *The Last Unicorn* does not take place in either the primary world we know or a fully realized secondary world compelling Tolkien's secondary belief, a mimic Middle-earth, but rather in a unique metafictional landscape poised between the two. Writing for *The Atlantic* on the novel's 50th anniversary, Yosef Lindell similarly declares, "One of the Best Fantasy Novels Ever Is Nothing Like *The Lord of the Rings*," coining the label "applied fantasy" to account for the difference: "The novel doesn't take place in a believable alternate world with clear rules and boundaries, but in a messy one more akin to ours. It's not epic fantasy, but applied fantasy—which is to say, readers aren't supposed to get lost in its invented world. We are supposed to import its lessons to our own world" ("One of the Best"). This assessment perhaps misunderstands how epic fantasy might "apply" equally well to our world—Tolkien himself, in his foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, proposed the term "applicability" in place of "allegory" to explain how he wished readers to approach interpreting his own work (5)—and such a view would seem to deny epic fantasy the capacity for anything except allowing readers to "get lost" inside its world. Nevertheless, one might fairly argue that in a metafantasy the path from fantasy to reality can be mapped far more clearly, although ironically often by not including the stereotypical fantasy map in the inside cover.[3] Praising Tolkien's foundational maps as practically singing off the page ("Tolkien's Magic Ring" xv), Beagle lets maps to others, making the choice never to include a cartographic reference guide to Haggard's country and its environs with any edition of *The Last Unicorn*: What could such a map look like? The world of *The Last Unicorn* cannot be mapped, because it is simply not a world.

Beagle's 2013 fantasy short story "The Queen Who Could Not Walk" begins with an instructive line for approaching such a fluid and fundamentally metafictional setting: "Far Away And Long Ago is a real country, older and more enduring than any bound by degrees and hours and minutes on a map" (*The Overneath* 69). In *The Last Unicorn*, how far away and how long ago the story appears to be taking place shifts as necessary at various moments in the novel, undermining the very idea of seeking Tolkien's secondary belief. While Kenneth Zahorski cautions that "[t]o mock the form one uses might be to lessen its credibility with the reader" (56), Dieter Petzold and others argue that such metafictional impulses do

not degrade fantasy but uplift it: “While they serve as a reminder of the essential intertextuality of fantasy fiction, they do not downgrade fantasy as ‘mere’ fiction. On the contrary, Beagle seems to insist on the importance, even the superiority, of the world of the imagination over ‘mere’ reality” (93). So too does Stevens find that, when “[t]he mechanics of the form are being laid bare, and the writer’s technique revealed,” Beagle nevertheless intends “a work that satirizes and glorifies its form” (“Incongruity” 236, 237). Many scholars who comment on Beagle’s humor view it not as end in itself but in service of a larger seriocomic orientation toward the world, as John Pennington proposes reading the novel “as a homage and a parody simultaneously, to see it as encompassing contradictory ‘visions’” (11). Thus, as Petzold argues, “The motifs out of which this fantasy—any fantasy—is constructed may be familiar, well worn, and easily made fun of, yet what they stand for remains relevant” (93). I would extend Petzold’s additional claim, however, that “the novel, on one level, is about beauty in general and the beauty of literary fantasy in particular” to add that, because Beagle ties beauty to meaning, the novel may ultimately be concerned with the potential for recapturing meaning inherent in literary fantasy rather than its aesthetics alone (93).

Beagle, then, never asks us to believe in the fantasy world of *The Last Unicorn*, encouraging us to laugh at its contradictions, but in the end he does ask us to believe in the quest, even in heroes, aspects of the novel that may seem at odds. In this world, for instance, it is possible for the following casual conversational exchange to take place: “‘I killed another dragon this morning,’ [Lír] said presently. “That’s nice,” Molly answered. “That’s fine. How many does that make now?” (176). It turns out to make five, and Lír’s sundry errantries lack the gravity of Tolkien’s Quest of Erebor: “hero” has become routinized as a profession—“It is a trade, no more” (251)—yet the unicorn seems to be on a typical fantasy quest to restore the land, to bring back the unicorns. We may well ask what distinguishes her quest from Lír’s day job as formulaic quester, and what that quest’s objective might mean, reading for its Tolkienian “applicability” to the real world, and for that matter what magic means, the object of Schmendrick’s own quest and something of which the unicorns themselves constitute a symbol. What does it mean to bring back the unicorns, to find magic again, or to find it for the first time, and why does the laughter fade only here? Jean Tobin has usefully pointed out that, in some of Beagle’s apparently frivolous wordplay

—such as the construction “will-o’-the-wish”—we can nevertheless see “the creative force inherent in our longing for the ideal” (“A Myth” 19). The novel’s humor, then, works in tandem with its earnestness as part of its creative expression and self-examination of creative expression. What Tobin refers to as “Peter Beagle’s mockery—even self-mockery—of artists” certainly relies on a self-deprecating metafictional humor: the creation of true art, like true magic, is difficult and rare (“A Myth” 22). In Tobin’s reading, “Schmendrick becomes the symbol of the true artist,” in contrast to the other artists and creators mocked for their ineptitude, although of course Schmendrick is himself at first as well (“A Myth” 23). From this perspective, Beagle mocks the cheap tricks and the bad artists—Schmendrick’s foulest curse is to threaten to turn his enemy into a “bad poet with dreams” (50)—in order to sacralize rather than mock the real magic at the center of his tale.

That Schmendrick serves as an image of the artist—despite or because of his other role as the main comic relief—is readily apparent from a cursory reading of the text, and was widely recognized early on in the critical response to the novel; for example, Granville Hicks’s 1968 book review confidently makes the identification: “The unicorn is a symbol of the imagination, and King Haggard’s country is an image of a world in which the imagination has been destroyed, a wasteland. Schmendrick represents the artist” (210). Olderman comments extensively on Schmendrick’s role as artist (230–233), and Michael Weingrad matches magic with storytelling more widely: “Beagle writes fantasies of a self-reflective sort. When he writes about magic, he often seems to be writing about writing” (“The Best Unicorn”). Along similar lines, in a piece titled “Magic as Metaphor,” Susan Palwick is somewhat more specific in framing the novel as “a book about metaphor, about the process by which we say that one thing is something else,” asserting that the “metaphor for metaphor itself is magic, the transformation of our perceptions of the physical world” (1). For Palwick, the magician-artist, wielding magic-metaphor, “offers paradigms allowing us to transform our perceptions of the world outside the book” (5). Sue Matheson concurs, judging the novel “a self-reflexive narrative that is as much concerned with the regeneration of meaningful language as with the process of psychic transformation” (416): “Magic is the medium by which the importance of metaphor is best illustrated” (424), and, “as the Unicorn travels throughout the world, the reader rediscovers

the sacred nature of the world itself" (425). If "Wizards make no difference" (264), Schmendrick's true magic—and role in the novel's denouement—lies finally in making the story go as it should, standing in for author and driving his hero to do as heroes must: "[Y]ou reminded him that he is a hero, and now he has to do what heroes do" (253). Of course, Beagle's humor serves the narrative's self-reflexivity, and the self-reflexivity provides one major engine for the humor in a recursive loop. But to continue to probe how *The Last Unicorn* reflects on the nature of magic, the nature of reality, the nature of the quest, and the nature of the fantasy form, it will be necessary to leave humor as such behind and focus on how the novel operates as a metafiction more broadly.

The Unicorn in the Mirror: Fantasy in, on, and about Fantasy

In 1988, a special issue of *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* considered Beagle's work in conjunction with Harlan Ellison's, after Beagle had attended the Ninth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts as guest of honor. In his introduction to the issue, Gary K. Wolfe argues that, along with Ellison, Beagle "embodies the values of the decade in which both of their reputations were solidified—the 1960s" (3). Wolfe goes on to describe *The Last Unicorn* as a product of its time in more ways than one, "a quest fantasy which at the same time parodies all quest fantasies—liberally sprinkled with ironies and incongruities which temper the book's innocent idealism without degrading it, and marked by a kind of self-referentiality that connects it to the metafictional experiments of mainstream sixties literature" (4). "Metafiction," while its impulses have now been detected throughout literary history, remains a term strongly associated with postmodern literature from the 1960s, and the fiction of John Barth in particular, whose novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), as well as the short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), attest to the chronological overlap of mainstream literary metafiction with Beagle's own early career. Barth's 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" has also acquired a reputation as a kind of manifesto for postmodern metafiction, and shortly before its publication Beagle in fact reviewed Barth's two most recent novels for *Holiday*. Beagle

expresses the greatest admiration for Barth's diagnosis of a contemporary ailment he calls "Barth's disease: that catatonic paralysis of the will from which I see people suffering every day; and from which I have suffered myself and may again" (134). This Barthian conception of modernity's malady may well have influenced the segments of *The Last Unicorn* during which Schmendrick and Amalthea, having arrived at their final destination, Haggard's castle, nevertheless fail to act on the brink of achieving the quest, discussed as the low point of the narrative in Chap. 2. But Beagle finally deems the sprawling *Giles Goat-Boy* a "brave failure" (135): "I don't think it works, but it's a fascinating failure" (134). In Beagle's estimation, Barth's characters, inhabitants of the metafictional funhouse, "struggle to transcend their state as symbols, but they never do" (135); by contrast, Raymond Olderman, who also writes in his book on Barth and the mainstream literature of the 1960s, praises Beagle precisely for fusing the symbolic and the very human so well: "[T]he more human he makes his characters, the more he paradoxically reinforces their ideological function—for the main message of the allegory is that there is magic in being human" (223). If Schmendrick and the unicorn, as loci of the magic in the novel, also serve as the more metafictional, Lír and Molly Grue may stand as the most "human" of the characters, and it is worth considering how the metafiction directs our attention toward them.

With considerable irony, Schmendrick expresses relief approximately halfway through the novel that the prince's name has been mentioned for the first time, as he had been "waiting for this tale to turn up a leading man" (128). Beagle winks at the structure of the hero's story that he follows, at the idea of heroes, but not perhaps at heroism. After Lír has transcended his earlier depiction as disinterested, magazine-reading marshmallow of a man through fantasy heroics (103)—"his adventures had made him much handsomer and taken off a lot of weight, and given him, besides, a hint of the musky fragrance of death that clings to all heroes" (200)—we may observe another parallel with Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" to add to the compendium in Chap. 2: "[I]t is one of the lessons of fairy-stories […] that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom" (58). Naturally, Beagle undercuts the loftiness of the line at once, responding to Molly's question about whether he will stop adventuring since it has not impressed Amalthea: "But the prince shook his head, looking almost embarrassed.

‘Oh, I suppose I’ll keep my hand in,’ he muttered” (200). His later, more self-assured insistence that heroes must do what heroes do—“the true secret of being a hero lies in knowing the order of things” (251)—he credits Amalthea for having taught him, but Schmendrick of course was the one who had nudged him in this direction, the novel’s primary teacher of narrative logic up this point: “Heroes know about order, about happy endings—heroes know that some things are better than others” (251–252). Lír’s role in the Red Bull’s defeat is not of the same order as his run-of-the-mill professional heroics—dragons are cheap in this world, after all, and the Bull is something else—but takes the form of a double sacrifice, of his own life but also the Lady Amalthea herself and his hope of a mortal love. Perhaps most significant of all is the third sacrifice shown in the novel’s denouement, a retreat from the romantic fantasy of dedicating his life to searching for the unicorn, and a resolution to rule his kingdom wisely and repair the damage that his father had done. Only after Lír has resisted becoming another Haggard, though wracked by insatiable desire—“she is mine!” (275); “that is not what I want!” (276)—can Schmendrick tell the distressed princess who has wandered into their story, “He is a good man, and a hero greater than any cause is worth” (293). Beagle’s novel remains suspicious of “causes,” skeptical indeed of heroes themselves, but not finally of Lír, the man.

Is Lír, then, actually the “leading man,” a hero at the center of his own narrative? Many readings emphasize Schmendrick instead, and, for instance, Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer class Schmendrick among fantasy’s “Everyman types, recognizable characters who represent all of us on our journeys” (8). From a different perspective, the thoroughly unmagical Molly Grue seems to come much nearer to embodying human readers of the novel than “the last of the red-hot swamis” (45) who “come[s] at last to his power” (271), or the foundling prince whose birth was accompanied by such portents of greatness. Beagle himself has referred to Molly as “the true heart of *The Last Unicorn*” (*The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* 138), and the novel declares her “more beautiful than the Lady Amalthea” near its end (291), a line that should likely be read in conjunction with Schmendrick’s earlier statement that “Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world” (151).[4] Molly’s bitterly ironic self-introduction as Maid Marian, “bare feet bleeding and beslimed,” affirms that in her we see the greatest

gap between fairy-tale analog and counterpart character in novel, and yet Beagle characterizes her in this fashion for specific reasons that elevate rather than belittle her (96). The pragmatic Molly, the novel's everywoman, is not wizard, witch, hero, unicorn, or royalty, reminding us of the wisdom from Schmendrick's teacher Nikos in the later short story "The Green-Eyed Boy" that "[t]he greatest wizards are the greatest realists, always" (*The Overneath* 20). Tellingly, unlike Lír, placed on his narrative pedestal by novel's end, Molly never becomes the butt of dozens of jokes. Tymn et al. compliment Lír for his gradual exaltation into the realm of high fantasy, "refined under the influence of this noble lady" (10), based on his transition from the original greeting "Hi" (161) to his subsequent "Give you good evening, my lady" (205). But the scene surrounding the latter statement lampoons Lír and the ambitions of his doggerel verse for pages upon pages, and his more formal greeting could be understood instead as a regrettable and comical lapse into the register that Beagle ridicules as "paperback medievalese" (44) or "castle talk" (109) in *The Folk of the Air*. Mocking the "silly, haunting, Ivanhoe language" (264) of the Society for Creative Anachronism analog in that novel maintains a distance between Beagle's work and more formulaic forms of fantasy. In the end, Beagle centers not Lír's absorption into the ultimately unreal world of fantasy ("Am I real, then?" [278]), but rather Molly's astonished wonder at its power—"her joy […] too great for her body to understand" (269)—not bystander but stand-in for the reader, for the real people who live in a real world, to whom unicorns may have come late, but not never, and who could always recognize them for what they were.

For Beagle to call Molly the heart of the novel, then, accords with Olderman's description of *The Last Unicorn* as an unusual specimen of metafiction with real people at its heart. It is also an unusual example of metafiction in reflecting less on fiction as a whole and more on its specific genre of fantasy, a metafantasy. Olderman, George Aichele, Jr., and R. E. Foust have done the most substantial work on the novel as a metafiction, and the latter may have been the first scholar to use the term "metafantasy": "I will use the prefix 'meta' to denote this same self-reflexive preoccupation with the linguistic or artificial features of fiction that is the metafictionist's primary creative concern. But the full term, 'meta-fantasy,' is also intended to convey a subtle difference between Beagle and other metafictionists" (9).[5] To differing degrees these scholars engage with the

then-nascent fantasy scholarship, theories of postmodernism, and other work concerned with the mainstream novel. Foust, for one, contrasts the intention of Beagle's metafictional play with that of mainstream writers, and argues, as did Chap. 2 of this book, that its purpose has much in common with what we could name (though Foust does not) as Tolkienian reenchantment:

> [The] metafictionists of the 1960s use artifice for parodic purposes, to demythologize the mystique of the magical nature of literature. Beagle's meta-fantasy, on the other hand, uses devices of obvious artifice to reify the reader's always tenuous sense of the fabulous. Its artifice thus re-mythologizes the barren world of fact upon which, however, fantasy relies for its effect. (9)

Foust's argument is complex and multipartite, but also striking for its position that Beagle's comic metafantasy, which can seem such a radical departure from the formula Tolkien inadvertently spawned, in fact resembles less self-conscious fantasy in so many ways, for example "start[ing] from the assumption of the magical properties of words, which is a key feature of all fantasy fiction" (11).[6] In the end, much like Olderman, Foust finds in Beagle's fantasy "a viable alternative to 'exhaustion,' to the entropic interpretation of human experience that is the terminal vision of both the parodic and the anti-novel novelist," and a "tempered optimism" (Foust 6). Such a view accords with David Van Becker's assessment that in the novel "[t]he negative of magic is 'the wanting of nothingness,' the 'willessness' Beagle found in the characters of John Barth" (61). Thus, while Aichele, Jr. follows Foust's use of the term metafantasy, he arrives at somewhat different conclusions from many scholars, even contending that, in the novel, "[i]t is implied that magic is opposed to meaning," magic being connected with "self-referentiality" and "opposition to truth" (57n1). Such a reading ignores the distinctions among different kinds of magic upon which *The Last Unicorn* insists. The essay also separates metafantasy more ontologically from the mainstream of fantasy and seeks to create further divisions within it as a subgenre: "This oscillation and fusion of opposed worlds distinguishes metafantasy as a subgenre and makes it more thoroughly and explicitly antimetaphysical and antigeneric than other forms of fantasy" (60).[7] Olderman and Foust extol Beagle for his ultimately

hopeful departures from the often dark, pessimistic, and/or self-obsessed metafictional labyrinths of his contemporaries, and Aichele, Jr. instead concludes his essay with a speculative imagining of a form beyond metafantasy that would achieve "the completion of self-referentiality" and shed any shred of story (66), two very different visions for the destination that metafantasy seeks.

Beagle himself was not the author to fulfill Aichele, Jr.'s vision. On the whole, Beagle's later-career fiction arguably moved far nearer to the typical genre fantasy and away from metafiction, away indeed from comedy, the two characteristics that so distinguished *The Last Unicorn* from Tolkien and Tolkien's early imitators. In other words, Beagle's fiction traveled farther from Barth and his metafictional fellows and closer to straightforwardly secondary-world fantasy (as in *The Innkeeper's Song* and *The Unicorn Sonata*), or urban fantasy (as in *The Folk of the Air* and *Summerlong*, in which the king and queen of the underworld wander into the lives of ordinary people living in and around Seattle). Storytelling remains a theme of Beagle's: while his more recent novels eschew the most flagrantly metafictional flourishes of *The Last Unicorn*, they do retain a more selective and subdued interest in reflecting on narrative, writing, and the writing process. The first-person narrators of Beagle's later fiction often call attention to the act of writing or storytelling, as does the narrator of *Tamsin*, for example, who regularly comments on how she is narrating the story as an older person than her past self who experienced it, and otherwise reflects on the book she is writing and what it omits: "[T]he hard part about writing a book isn't telling what happened, even if it happened a long time ago—it's trying to call back, not just the way you felt about the thing that happened, but the entire person who felt that way" (44); "I'm stuck between who I think I was and who I think I am, between what happened to me and what I think really happened" (86); "I'm saying all this now, ages later, but at the time I didn't think any of it" (238). In other words, some self-reflexivity persists, but it has been directed into other, subtler channels.

And perhaps *The Last Unicorn* features sufficient self-reflexivity for one career, with its obsession with fantasy and reality and blurring the lines between the two. Molly, that most human of characters, playfully describes herself as a fiction, asserting the greater "reality" of a legendary character: "'Nay, Cully, you have it backward,' she called to him. 'There's no such a person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are

the legend!'" (89). There is a layered irony here, in that of course Molly herself is also a fictional character, as readers of the novel know, even if she does not. Schmendrick repeats similar ideas, switching out Robin Hood for the unicorn, which readers know to be a mythical beast: "Haggard and Lír and Drinn and you and I—we are in a fairy tale, and must go where it goes. But she is real. She is real" (128). The narration, too, had earlier referred to the two impossible immortal creatures as the only real beings present at the Midnight Carnival: "So they circled one another like a double star, and under the shrunken sky there was nothing real but the two of them" (52–53). Onlookers mistaking the unicorn for a mare also exclaim, "There's a real horse!" (10), as if the unicorn is the ideal Platonic form of the horse, of which real horses can be but imperfect reflections, unreal in their mere reality, mere physical existence.

Beagle may seem to embrace paradox in defining reality as its opposite, but, as the unicorn says of the Midnight Carnival, "There's more meaning than magic to this" (25). As Foust has parsed it so well, "Beagle's use of parody to lampoon parody is at the service of his vision of the permanent and changeless reality of archetype […]: the many fabulous and epiphanic events declare the *extra-textual* reality of archetypes of true heroism and beauty as the permanent substructure of reality" (15). Here too Beagle uses metafiction to make a point resembling one in Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories": "The maddest castle that ever came out of a giant's bag in a wild Gaelic story is not only much less ugly than a robot-factory, it is also […] a great deal more real" (72). Cully, for instance, hopes "even to have one's authenticity doubted" (83), because that would mean he had joined the higher or deeper echelon of mythic reality, ascending to archetype rather than the pale imitation that is a human being, those "still, shabby forms by the fire" through which Robin Hood strides (88). In the novel, then, unicorns in all their unreality—"what you have forgotten how to see," as Schmendrick tells the townsfolk admiring his "horse" (66)—perhaps come to symbolize a way of seeing, and seeing that substructure of reality, just as the wizard later describes magic as consisting mainly in "seeing and listening" (227). The unicorn remains outside story when she symbolizes story, and Schmendrick must inform the transformed Amalthea, "You're in the story with the rest of us now, and you must go with it, whether you will or no" (151). Humans, mortals, live in and live out their own stories, and so a metafiction or a metafantasy can become a commentary on human life as

much as it comments on the unreality of fantasy; fiction and its opposite become one.

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Footnotes

1 I quote here from Stevens's 1979 *Extrapolation* essay "Incongruity in a World of Illusion: Patterns of Humor in Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*," though this piece forms the basis of the second chapter of his monograph *Beyond Horatio's Philosophy*, published decades later, an impressionistic book that the author describes as driven largely by reader-response criticism (11).

2 Stevens traces how Beagle gives almost every character at least a line or two of comic dialogue (the greatest part of course reserved for Schmendrick), emphasizing the "use of incongruity for comic effect" (231), and holding that "the most important mode of humor used in the novel is anticlimax" (233).

3 Diana Wynne Jones views the map as the foundation of all "travel" to Fantasyland in her *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*: "No Tour of Fantasyland is complete without one" (no pagination).

4 Molly has not always received the kindest treatment in the criticism. By way of example, multiple reviewers and commentators describe her erroneously as a witch, including Darrell Schweitzer in the *St. James Guide to Fantasy Writers*; Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer summarize her identity as "slatternly mistress of an inept highwayman" (51); and M. John Harrison's *New Worlds* review of the novel refers to her as "a harridan called Molly Grue" (62).

5 Brian Attebery himself used the term "metafantasy" to describe Le Guin's 1980 novel *The Beginning Place* as a "fantasy about fantasy" shortly after Foust's article appeared in *Extrapolation* but without reference to it (122).

6 Foust never collapses metafantasy into fantasy and adds here, for example, that "self-reflexivity enhances the fiction's purpose by further estranging the reader from the historical world at a level deeper than the thematic, and, in so doing, creates a substructural reinforcement of the theme" (11).

7 Aichele, Jr. endeavors to define multiple forms of metafantasy, although in the end they may differ more by degree on a spectrum: “Like many other types of fantasy, metafantasy establishes two or more worlds, each a distorted image of the other, but unlike other fantasies, it allows no escape from one to the other; instead it establishes an endless oscillation between worlds, a reciprocal interference with one another which becomes more and more violent until a blurring of every self-identical entity occurs. The story’s beginning may be orderly, but no new order or return to meaning clearly emerges after the fantastic disruption. The two forms of metafantasy differ in the degree to which the oscillation between worlds affects the story” (56).

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5. Unicorn Variations: Continuity and Change in the Many Versions of *The Last Unicorn*

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Abstract
This chapter first examines the 1962 first draft of Beagle's novel, and demonstrates how some of the author's concerns and themes appear with different emphasis in each version: in particular, Beagle's environmentalist motivations become clearer in light of the draft. In an effort to understand the range and complexity of the many other versions of *The Last Unicorn* that now exist, the chapter next proceeds to assesses the major adaptations of the novel to other media forms, as well as Beagle's own narrative continuations and prequels that followed on the original story, finding reflections on continuity and change lending a common theme to all of them.

Keywords Adaptation – *The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey* – *The Last Unicorn* (1982)

"Walkin' Man's Road": Recentering Ecological Critique Along the Unicorn's Road

In the early twenty-first century, Beagle experienced a sort of late-career renaissance, and his prolific recent output includes a number of projects that revisit the world and characters of *The Last Unicorn*, even though the first direct sequel to the book, 2005's "Two Hearts," did not appear until 37 years after its initial publication. In 2023, the new collection *The Way Home* provided a long-delayed sequel for "Two Hearts" itself, another novella titled "Sooz." This chapter will consider these narratives and the shorter pieces by Beagle set in the world of *The Last Unicorn*, but also many of the other assorted ephemera that have appeared over the years, more marginal members of this franchise-that-is-not-a-franchise. Of course, over the past 50 years and more since its first publication, Beagle's novel itself has led a far from marginal life in fantasy, nestled firmly near the center of any conception of the genre as an Atteberian "fuzzy set," despite its comedic and metafictional dimensions (see *Strategies of Fantasy* 12–14). As central as the text has remained in conversations about fantasy, and as often as it has been reprinted, the novel's multitude of adaptations and abridgments—and also an abortive early draft—have received far less attention from scholars and have lurked more furtively on the edges of fantasy and indeed Beagle's own long career. We will see that the original novel's self-reflexive commentary on fantasy runs through and becomes refracted across not only the 1982 animated adaptation of *The Last Unicorn* but also the more recent comic book/graphic novel version; Beagle's other stories set in the same universe; and the earlier fragmentary draft later published as "The Lost Version" and then "The Lost Journey."[1] Making these marginal works more central to our reading of *The Last Unicorn* can also reveal new insights about both the original text and the many such related works it has generated, in the case of the draft version recuperating more explicitly environmentalist and anti-capitalist positions undergirding the narrative's imagery and themes. Above all, across all of these other variations on and responses to *The Last Unicorn*, we can find an emergent concern with change itself connected to the novel's ruminations on the desire for immortality and an inability to change associated with its villainous figures.

This first section proposes a recentering of ecological critique in *The Last Unicorn* based on evidence from the early draft version. The text of this unfinished 1962 draft was first published by Subterranean Press in 2007, but in a print run limited to only one thousand copies, all signed by the author. A single 2018 hardcover reprinting by Tachyon has rendered this

once totally unknown first start slightly less ephemeral, and a reader happily does not have to travel to an archive in order to see such an important text. The draft 1962 and published 1968 versions of the novel have vastly different plots and casts of supporting characters, and yet certain sentences and paragraphs are nevertheless preserved entirely unchanged in the published work, including some memorable passages from the opening chapters. As early as 1962, for example, "[t]he unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone," the famous first sentence of the published novel (1).[2] Essential characters, however, such as Schmendrick, Molly Grue, King Haggard, and Mommy Fortuna do not appear at all, replaced or rather preceded by such comic figures as a depressed dragon and a two-headed, cigarette-eating demon. Most noteworthy, however, are those few images and scenes that appear in the published novel but revised and recontextualized in comparison to their earlier forms, for example the butterfly episode: in such scenes we can trace Beagle's process of composition and revision most plainly.[3]

The most important such reworked image is that of the road, and "the Road" with a capital "R," an image at once literal and metaphorical for a journey and life's journey, and which recalls Tolkien's hobbit walking songs from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Bilbo sings one such song before leaving the Shire and heading off to Rivendell for a kind of retirement: "*The Road goes ever on and on* / *Down from the door where it began*" (44).[4] Bilbo's version continues, "*And I must follow, if I can,* / *Pursuing it with eager feet,* / *Until it joins some larger way* / *Where many paths and errands meet*" (44). Frodo, with a far less sunny destination ahead of him, shares a version of the same song later in *The Fellowship of the Ring* but switches out "eager feet" for "weary feet" (83). He next recollects Bilbo's habit of viewing the path outside his own doorstep as the same interconnected and sempiternal "Road":

> He used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,' he used to say. 'You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to. Do you realize that this is the very path that goes through Mirkwood, and

> that if you let it, it might take you to the Lonely Mountain or even further and to worse places?' (83)[5]

Both Beagle's first draft and the published novel include a line that evokes this teleological way of viewing a road at the start of a journey, evoking Bilbo's musings on the eternal roadway. The unicorn takes a cautious step onto the road outside the home she has never before left, and immediately feels its intimidating length: "Under the moon, the road that ran from the edge of her forest gleamed like water, but when she stepped out onto it, away from the trees, she felt how hard it was, and how long" (16 in *The Lost Journey*, 8 in the published novel). The road seems to frighten the unicorn more than it does the hobbits, however, and she makes for a more reluctant adventurer than Bilbo the unlikely burglar had been early in *The Hobbit*. The eventual cost of adventure to her might even exceed Frodo's post-homecoming suffering due to his own incurable wounds, since hers cannot be healed by a journey into the west, but only endured across the infinity that is her immortal lifespan. The unease in the unicorn's farewell to Schmendrick, also her final words in the novel—"I will try to go home" (289)—evokes Frodo's need to depart the Shire in *The Return of the King*, the home he cannot return to, having been "too deeply hurt" (309). To walk the road representing the journey that will change the unicorn forever, rendering her capable of sorrow and regret, thus already has terrifying implications for her. But a key detail in the 1962 draft adds further layers to the resonance of this image, namely environmentalist and anti-capitalist dimensions incidentally accentuated in one of the songs that plays in the 1982 animated film version, "Man's Road," to which we will return shortly.

That detail is simply that, in the 1962 text, the phrase "the road" is most often referred to with an additional epithet as "the black road," meaning an asphalt road, modern pavement designed for use by motor vehicles and not the hooves of magical creatures, such that the unicorn finds herself in perpetual danger of being struck by passing "coaches": "each time she started out of her half-sleep, there was only the black road and the swift coaches rushing by" (24); "the black road hurt her feet" (22); "Oh, that road,' he [the dragon] mourned, 'that terrible black road'" (8). As the dragon warns the unicorn, "the road to your forest is made of black iron, and on it, all day and all night, the coaches run and roar, and flash yellow lights till they drive you mad, and yell like sea-demons" (8). In turn, the

demon later asks her the reasonable question, “What may a unicorn be doing on a superhighway?” (43), a question worth asking ourselves. Why and whence this modern road in a fantasy story otherwise evocative of premodernity? Beagle’s published novel of course thematizes modern disenchantment through its central image of magic and unicorns having gone out of the world, with most humans unable to recognize the one lingering unicorn or what she truly is. But the so-called “Lost Version” or “Lost Journey” draft makes a more explicit critique of, for example, capitalist modernity, consumerism, car culture, and environmental degradation from a more obviously ecologically minded perspective. In fact, the unfinished narrative peters out shortly after an apocalyptic vision of a modern city, the first sign of which is “a curl of black smoke,” which as the traveling companions draw nearer parts to reveal “endless rows of middle-sized houses, grinding like teeth upon the people in the streets” (106). In this urban and very twentieth-century landscape, a new spirit of the age “was everywhere and in everyone” (107), and Beagle depicts it as spiritually lethal:

> The terrible rhythm seized the people by their bones and marched them to and fro, up and down stairs, into little rooms and out of them, back and forth in their houses, around and around in other people’s crowded houses; it marched them miles and miles in their beds, it lifted them, set them down, threw them on their backs, lifted them to their feet again and drove them stumbling against one another. It hammered and hammered at the weakest places in them, never giving them time to heal, but only time to invent new ways of healing themselves and to buy whatever they told one another could stop the pain. (107–108)

This is where the black road leads, to a gray world full of gray people enervated unto suffocation by the literally and metaphorically polluted “new air” (12) of which the dragon had spoken: “she could see them slowing down in the hard air, losing their colors as fish do when they die” (106). Beagle, not having a solution to the problems that he diagnoses in twentieth-century life, concludes the unfinished draft shortly thereafter, and would pick up the narrative only years later, replacing the specter of the

black road that leads to the gray city with, in one key instance, a new locus of undefinable evils, the Red Bull.

To the long catalog of possible interpretations of the Red Bull, we can now add an understanding of it as a harbinger of a destructive form of modernity, and recover the ecological urgency that drove Beagle in the early stages of conceiving the unicorn and her world (and indeed is reflected in several of his nonfiction writings into the 1970s, as Chaps. 1 and 2 have noted). Just as, in his *Lord of the Rings* headnote, Beagle welcomes in Tolkien's fantasy "a green alternative to each day's madness here in a poisoned world" (3), we can see the same impulse at work in his mind in the 1962 draft most clearly, and also trace how the environmentalist dimension of *The Last Unicorn* would grow more subtle without disappearing. In both versions of the text, the unicorn encounters a butterfly who spouts snatches of song and poetry that mingle nonsense and wisdom in roughly equal measure. In the published novel, this wanderlusting lepidopteran is the one to tell her of the Red Bull, introducing the overdetermined signifier first as a symbol of oblivion: "You can find your people if you are brave. They passed down all the roads long ago, and the Red Bull ran close behind them and covered their footprints" (15). In the earlier draft, the image of oblivion is instead the paved black road that heralds disenchanted capitalist modernity, along with modern urbanization: "They passed through all the cities long ago, and the black road ran close behind them and covered their footprints" (32). We can thus append the new identification "the Bull is the black road of modernity" to Schmendrick's compilation of explanations for what the Red Bull might be and mean, discussed at greater length in Chap. 2: "The Bull is real, the Bull is a ghost, the Bull is Haggard himself when the sun goes down. […] The Bull belongs to Haggard. Haggard belongs to the Bull" (57–58). When Beagle tells us immediately after this recitation that the unicorn, hearing such a confusion of possibilities, nonetheless "felt a shiver of sureness spreading though her" (58), that sureness suggests an affirmation of what the butterfly had told her originally, that the Red Bull brings erasure, oblivion, and obliteration of meaning, just as, in the earlier draft, Beagle frames modern industrial civilization as grinding down urbanized citizens in motorized vehicles to a state of compulsively frenzied anhedonia.[6] The Red Bull paves over the traces of magic in the world.

In the published novel, it is King Haggard himself, disenchanted and spiritually impoverished, who has largely taken the place of the coaches on the dark road rushing to the grey city. Haggard is the post-magical modern man, the one waiting at the end of that black road, even if in the draft Beagle had not yet mapped the way to his particular grim fortress. Fittingly, in the 1962 version, the butterfly warns the unicorn not to embrace the adventurer's road as Bilbo learns to do, but rather to "Get off the road, get off the road, for you'll never get to the end of it by following it" (33). But she—and we—cannot find a way off the road, and the first-draft unicorn cannot escape the feeling that the black road is something she will never truly leave, having once set foot on it: "I hate this road. I think I will always feel it under my feet, like something I've stepped in and can't scrape off" (36). Without access to the 1962 false start, John Pennington intriguingly insists that, "[w]hereas the harpy is natural, the Red Bull is man-made" (15), attesting to how the published novel resonates with some of the draft's original conceptions: the Bull is Haggard is Haggard's wasteland kingdom, all versions of that black road of progress that came before them. In short, taking into account the evidence of the first draft, the capital "R" "Road" terrifies the unicorn because it was first intended as a specific symbol of disenchanted techno-capitalist modernity, rather than the less specific set of metaphors it can otherwise appear to contain in the published novel, for example more in line with the precedent in Tolkien's writings where the road can be identified with the uncertainty of adventure and the hardships of a long journey, and life-as-adventure and life-as-journey. Beagle was more concerned with modern life in his draft allegory, not some transhistorical idea of "life," and in a critique quite specific to his century, even his decade, the dawn of the modern environmentalist conscience in the Western world; Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared in the same year that Beagle drafted this version of *The Last Unicorn*.

Reading *The Last Unicorn* and its first draft from an ecocritical perspective can also lead us to reappraise certain elements of its 1982 adaptation to children's film in the hands of Arthur Rankin, Jr. and Jules Bass. On the film's 40th anniversary in 2022, Kimberly Coburn writes of her experience rewatching a beloved classic from her childhood and discovering that it now "feels nearly prophetic" in its resonance with very contemporary ecological anxieties: "Extinction haunts the film from its earliest moments" ("*The Last Unicorn* at 40"). Speaking to Coburn, Beagle

acknowledges having read Carson's landmark call to action in 1962—"I'd read 'Silent Spring' when it came out, and the degradation of the environment was something discussed around my family's dinner table"—and also confesses to a present eco-pessimism: "In honesty, I don't have a great deal of hope for this wondrous planet" ("*The Last Unicorn* at 40"). Coburn's expressions of love for a VHS tape—"I nearly wore through my VHS copy of the animated feature"—echo a common refrain from her generation ("*The Last Unicorn* at 40"). If Beagle's 1968 novel played such a major part in shaping American fantasy and its image partly due to the timing of its publication at a crucial moment in the development of the genre, so too did the 1982 animated adaptation succeed so well in large part because it arrived at a particularly fortuitous time in the history of both animation and the entertainment market more broadly. As with several previous productions, Rankin/Bass outsourced the film's animation entirely to the Japanese studio Topcraft. While the practice enabled Rankin/Bass to produce a large number of children's animated films at comparatively low cost—for the most part largely forgotten television specials—in this case the aesthetic quality of the feature film's animation did not suffer. In fact, several of the animators who contributed to *The Last Unicorn* would go on to work on internationally acclaimed projects as Japanese animation began to achieve global recognition. Hayao Miyazaki worked with Topcraft himself on his own ecologically minded 1984 hit *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, and several members of the company went on to join Miyazaki's new powerhouse Studio Ghibli, heralding a new era in animation of which we could call *The Last Unicorn* one tributary. A number of subsequent Studio Ghibli films would continue to develop ecological themes and otherwise thematize landscape, perhaps most notably 1994's *Pom Poko* and 1997's *Princess Mononoke*.

One of Rankin/Bass's few theatrical releases, *The Last Unicorn* itself achieved modest success upon opening, its initial weekend gross ranking sixth among all domestic films according to the data available on Box Office Mojo (*Box Office*). By way of comparison, however, during the same weekend the animated adaptation still failed to outperform Spielberg's *E. T.*, which by that point had been in theaters for almost half a year. *The Last Unicorn* did outearn the more direct competition represented by the two other new animated releases the same weekend, Hanna-Barbera's *Heidi's Song* and the Warner Bros. anthology *Bugs Bunny's 3rd Movie: 1001 Rabbit*

Tales, but the greater impact of the film would result from its long afterlife on home video. The 1960s marked the first true unicorn decade in fantasy literature, but the 1980s saw the crest of an even larger unicorn wave in popular culture, of which the film and its VHS tape became a major part: looking back at Beagle's novel in 1989, Susan Palwick could describe the 1980s as a new "world where unicorns prance on wall posters and kitchen magnets and bookmarks, in which anyone who has ever entered a card shop wishes the creatures had never been invented" ("Magic as Metaphor" 1).[7] The unicorn had gone mass-market, but, as we will see, this does not mean the film adaptation cannot speak to some of Beagle's ecological concerns.

The 1982 film's animation style aims for a timeless quality, grounded in part in the otherworldly medieval tapestries that have inspired so many modern unicorns, but nothing dates the movie more to a specific time and place of production than its musical choices, which entailed, rather than elevating any of Beagle's own songs from the novel and setting them to music, commissioning a soundtrack to be composed by Jimmy Webb and performed by the rock band America. One of these songs, however, titled "Man's Road," works to reinforce the non-Anthropocentric energies most visible in the 1962 draft. The song plays over a montage of the unicorn traveling through various landscapes and weather patterns until she arrives at a rather premodern-looking cottage. The song's reframing of Beagle's road emphasizes that the unicorn is walking "Man's Road," a road that wears on her precisely because it was created by humans, implicitly inimical therefore to her and to the creatures of her forest, which not incidentally include the now-extinct dodo bird in the film: "For in my heart I carry such a heavy load / Here I am, on Man's Road / Walking Man's Road." On the one hand, the visual aesthetic of the film leans into medievalism despite retaining some of the novel's jocular anachronisms in its dialogue ("Have a taco"). In this respect, the visual language of the film moves farther away from the first draft's conception of the unicorn and her world of magic in direct conflict with a disenchanted, dispiriting modernity, flattening the more complicated Nowhere/Nowhen-land of the novel into a quite Shire-like vision of rustic premodernity. And yet the redefinition of Beagle's road with the unique new modifier "Man's Road" does establish an anxiety about the encroachment of human industrial civilization on the nonhuman world of which the unicorn is a representative, what Ursula K. Le Guin has memorably described as "fantasy's green country," an

idealized premodernity that for Le Guin can serve radical rather than reactionary purposes in opposing the imperatives of capitalist modernity toward destructive ideals of "progress" ("Critics" 86). In the novel's description of Haggard as a ruinous conqueror who "came over the sea" (109), we may even find a hint of anti-colonial critique. As this triptych of versions of the same narrative speaks to in three different ways, Beagle's road—in the published novel, still a "long road [that] hurried to nowhere" (8)—is not a universal road, but a human-made and ultimately self-destructive one, leading nowhere, although also, crucially, one that fantasy can unmake, at least imaginatively.

New Audiovisual Languages in the Abridgments of *The Last Unicorn*

As a 90-minute children's film, the animated adaptation of *The Last Unicorn* can also be understood as an abridgment, omitting as it does the entire existence of Hagsgate. Similarly, the graphic novel adaptation of the narrative, first released in 2010 in six separate issues by IDW, necessarily compresses the narrative to a considerable degree, even as it continues to lean heavily on some of Beagle's own words. For the most obvious example of abridgment, however, we could point to the humble book-on-tape version from the early 1990s. It is true that, among the many versions of *The Last Unicorn*, this latter abridgment shows the least interest in thematizing change, and remains most transparently influenced by the demands of its material form and target market. Even so, each of these abridged works represents an adaptation and collaboration with the author himself that can exploit unique auditory and visual languages specific to their media forms, opening new channels for communicating Beagle's vision for and reflections on the story of *The Last Unicorn*. The ending of the previous section demonstrated how the animated film uses a new musical composition to bring out a certain thematic emphasis, and this section will continue a survey of the novel's extensive tradition of adaptation by very briefly highlighting a few of the ways in which the audiobooks and graphic novel have likewise complemented and added to the novel even when subtracting other elements from its narrative.

At time of writing, three audiobook versions of *The Last Unicorn* have been produced over the past three decades, two as collaborations with Beagle reading the text himself, and the most recent and most readily available being the 2022 Penguin Audio production narrated by Orlagh Cassidy and Joshua Kane rather than the author. The second of Beagle's own performances remains obscure in the wake of legal issues stemming from the author's disputes with Connor Cochran, his former manager and sometime publisher. These disputes culminated in a lawsuit that Beagle won in 2019 and a subsequent reclamation of his intellectual property rights, but the unabridged audiobook version read by the author himself, with the songs restored and performed by Beagle, had been released directly by Cochran's troubled Conlan Press, which seems never to have produced and shipped the CD versions of the audiobook. The work thus exists in copies descending from MP3 downloads made available for purchase on the Conlan Press website in 2005, and later via Audible.com and so on for a limited window.[8] Once more widely accessible was Beagle's 1993 book-on-tape reading, although, in order to fit the text of the novel onto only two cassette tapes, this version cuts many of the in-text songs, Beagle's most conspicuous Tolkienian affectations. The book is introduced on the first cassette as "an abridgement read by the author"; listeners then hear an instrumental musical prelude before the novel's first line. There is no need to compare the texts closely here, but, most obviously, the abridgment inherent to this first audiobook version radically alters the novel's ending. Rather than taking advantage of the audiobook form to bring Beagle's music to life, Schmendrick and Molly Grue now depart in the distance singing a song we do not hear, another brief instrumental outro replacing the text of the 13-line folk song duet with which in the novel Beagle sends off his characters and his readers (294). (The unabridged audiobook recorded by Beagle restores the final song, and the author performs it with guitar accompaniment.) While very few (or no one) may be experiencing the narrative in the book-on-tape form today due to simple technological obsolescence, such transmedial relics of the pre-franchise era still provide glimpses into how the story has been experienced; indeed, another form of obsolete analog media, the VHS cassette, played a crucial role in the continuing popularity of the narrative for over two decades.[9] The first audiobook abridgment preserves a record of the author's own intonations and emphases in a reading of a novel that celebrates the lyricism and

musicality of language itself. The unicorns encoded on magnetic tape are not peripheral or ephemeral at all, but still central to the story, or rather the history, of *The Last Unicorn* as a cross-media, multigenerational narrative.

The generation that can expect graphic novel adaptations of most literary works of sufficient popularity can now experience *The Last Unicorn* in that necessarily abridged form, and the visual artists have had the opportunity to expand the story in other respects into this visual medium. Adapter Peter Gillis explains that in their creative process the team had to work "against" both the novel itself and the established visual iconography of the animated film, but also adds, "Whenever possible I have used Peter's actual words," to the point of reserving a full page to contain Molly and Schmendrick's valedictory song, the song that even the first audiobook did not include (159). He also expresses regret over the considerable compression that resulted from a 6-issue rather than a 12-issue format: "I really miss Haggard's men-at-arms not being there, but there simply wasn't room" (159). The leisurely first issue does not even cover the narrative action of the book's first chapter, but the pace accelerates as the second issue must encompass the entirety of the Midnight Carnival (corresponding to the novel's Chapters 2 and 3 and some of Chapters 1 and 4), even so managing to restore Elli, cut from the animated film. Here the harpy's gruesome, large-breasted depiction seems influenced by the 1982 film as much as the novel's description. The third issue takes readers into and out of the Greenwood, and therefore near to the end of Chapter 6, only about a third of the way through the novel. The remaining issues span a few more pages than the previous, but become forced to condense more severely, especially after the fourth issue can go no farther than Hagsgate and the unicorn's transformation (Chapters 7 and 8), leaving the second half of the novel for the final two issues. Accordingly, the fifth issue must render all of Chapters 9–12 (up to the point that the heroes travel through the clock), leaving the remaining two chapters for the sixth and final issue.

In order to reintroduce Hagsgate and other elements omitted from the film, the scenes in Haggard's castle become the most thoroughly abridged, although in general the proximity of the narrative to the original is close, with a few small inventive touches. For example, each of the butterfly's quotations appears in a different font, furthering the bricolage effect, and additional ocean and wave imagery colors the first confrontation with Red Bull. Other visual foreshadowing parallels Beagle's frequent reference to

the sea early in the novel, such as the moment in the graphic novel when the unicorn gazes down through a waterfall to wonder, “But suppose they are hiding together, somewhere far away?” (Issue 1). Many of Beagle’s references remain—to Pliny, the Chinese, John Henry, tacos, and more—yet, as with the animated film, the adapters take the novel’s world somewhat more seriously and represent it more consistently, at least to the extent that we see few of the more exaggerated jokes literalized: no decapitated ogre’s head harmonizes in song with Lír (219), and no luna moths sizzle to death in Mommy Fortuna’s blazing eyes (37). On the whole, the adaptation remains rather formally conservative, in that it does not attempt as many frame-breaking gestures for its medium as the novel does with respect to its own; David Stevens has also commented on its overall loss of irony and humor (*Beyond Horatio’s Philosophy* 50). All the same, the imagistic vocabulary of the new medium affords additional representational channels to exploit in telling the story of *The Last Unicorn*. For instance, as Kenneth Zahorski has rightly said of the film, “[t]he Red Bull’s protean nature […] lent itself perfectly to animation” (99), and the graphic novel similarly revels in leaving the Red Bull’s form unfixed, shifting across pages and taking on new associations with molten rock or metal, the forge, and lightning, suggesting a stormy sea-entity. Multiple variant covers for the issues were also produced by Renae De Liz and Frank Stockton that imagine the unicorn and the Bull in very different ways. The adaptation, then, proves inherently multiple and iterative, embracing the fluidity that Schmendrick praises as the secret of the magician’s art in his sales pitch to Haggard: “[O]nly to a magician is the world forever fluid, infinitely mutable and eternally new. Only he knows the secret of change, only he knows truly that all things are crouched in eagerness to become something else, and it is from this universal tension that he draws his power” (163). Despite its differences and all of its changes to the story major and minor, the adaptation demonstrates an obvious love and respect for the original, and when scenes must be abridged they sometimes persist in marginal details, a blue jay shown watching the unicorn even though it does not speak, and adjacent to the words “THE END,” a rabbit writing with a quill pen on a scroll, imagining that future day the unicorn will live to see, “when men are fairy tales in books written by rabbits” (286). Following Beagle’s humble self-identification with the butterfly is the

artist's final identification with not the Lepidoptera but the similarly lowly Leporidae.

Embracing Change and Reflecting on Fantasy in the Narrative Continuations

In 1995, Beagle wrote, "I could happily live out the rest of my time on the planet without ever having another thing to do with unicorns" (*Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn* xi). Roughly one year later, he added, "never for a moment did I feel the least interest in exploring […] what became of Molly Grue and Schmendrick the Magician" (*Giant Bones* ix–x).

By then that initial reluctance to continue older stories had already begun to thaw, as he speaks of how the world of *The Innkeeper's Song*, the author's avowed favorite among his novels, made him want to write the shorter follow-up works collected in *Giant Bones*: "Then again, maybe it'll yet turn out, even this late in the game, that I actually do sequels" (xi). In retrospect, we see here the protestations of an author coming to terms with a desire, after more than three decades, to change his former stance toward returning to past narrative worlds, and soon enough Beagle would revisit other tales beyond *The Innkeeper's Song*, although its setting does remain his most frequently revisited. In short, Beagle changed his mind, and in doing so changed the world of *The Last Unicorn* as well, and in ways worthy of our attention.

For nearly 40 years, Beagle did not write any sequel to *The Last Unicorn* or other work extending the metafictional fantasy world imagined in it, but 2005 saw the publication of his novella "Twohearts," itself followed by a steady trickle of prequel stories featuring Schmendrick though no unicorn: "The Woman Who Married the Man in the Moon" (2011), "The Green-Eyed Boy" (2016), and "Schmendrick Alone" (2017). The year 2009's "Oakland Dragon Blues" also resurrects the maudlin dragon from the 1962 draft into a contemporary setting, an abandoned character that had clearly been on Beagle's mind after Subterranean first printed the manuscript a few years prior. In his headnote to the latter story's reprinting in his 2011 collection *Sleight of Hand*, Beagle explains that the dragon was cut in the revision, but he remembered it when invited to contribute to an anthology of dragon stories (198). The metafictional

narrative reads like a cross between Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Stephen King's *Misery*, as a police officer must deal with a dragon blocking traffic in Oakland, and specifically a dragon depressed and displaced by his abandonment: "The author put me in his book right at the beginning, and then he changed his mind"; "Not one line left—and I had some good ones, whole paragraphs. All gone" (204). Having been written out of *The Last Unicorn*, the dragon is left to wander the real world, and seeks his vengeance on an unnamed author living in Berkeley ("It mentioned the writer's name, which was not one Guerra knew" [204]). When the dragon confronts its maker, the author can only exorcise it by "telling it a story about itself" (211), creating a storyworld in which it can live on the fly, establishing a precedent we will see continue in the later narratives that return more directly to *The Last Unicorn* for building on the metafictional character of the original from new angles, and culminating in the valedictory sequel to "Two Hearts," 2023's "Sooz". What follows will provide a short description of each of these works in turn, emphasizing how they attempt simultaneously to return to a familiar narrative setting and thus enact a repetition, but also to do so in ways that position change, difference, growth, and a pursuit of newness as fundamental to storytelling and human life.

In contrast to the light comedy of "Oakland Dragon Blues," "The Woman Who Married the Man in the Moon," first published in *Sleight of Hand* alongside it, casts Schmendrick's hopeless quest for true magic in a rather darker light than in *The Last Unicorn*, as it depicts him interrupted in a suicide attempt by lost children. With his "hat that looks like a cross between a dunce cap and a crown," Schmendrick is as ever both magician and jester/fool (11). He returns the children to their widowed mother who narrates the story-within-a-story that gives the text its title, and who imparts some lessons about the value of story: "I tell myself stories, just as you do, to comfort myself, to endure—simply to get through to another morning. And there is one story in particular that has always meant something to me. Different things at different times, perhaps, but something always" (26). Other passages reflect on the relationship between narrative and life, a recurrent theme of *The Last Unicorn*: "Stories never end. *We* end. If we could but live long enough, we would see how all tales go on and on past the telling" (27). Lastly, one further line closely evokes Molly Grue's scolding of Schmendrick's ignorance about unicorns, reminding us that he

has much to learn in this prequel and in the novel: “Magic is not what you think it is, magician” (29).

“The Green-Eyed Boy” and “Schmendrick Alone,” both collected in *The Overneath*, visit yet earlier moments in the wizard’s life (at ages 12 and 20, respectively). The first story adopts the perspective of Schmendrick’s teacher Nikos, and appropriately riffs on the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” folktale type, affording Beagle many opportunities to continue his metafantastic reflections on the nature and meaning of magic. For example, Nikos distills the essence of magic into acknowledging the inevitability of change: “The whole secret of magic […] is that nothing is *fixed*, nothing is forever; that *everything* […] yearns to be something else” (16). He also tells the reader that “magic never yet fed anyone properly” (15), an echo of Ursula Le Guin (whose dragons Beagle regularly praises as superlative members of the species), who explains in *A Wizard of Earthsea* that magic can fool the senses but not sustain the body: “[W]e don’t much wish to eat our words, as they say. *Meat-pie!* Is only a word, after all . . . We can make it odorous, and savorous, and even filling, but it remains a word. It fools the stomach and gives no strength to the hungry man” (111).[10] Beyond its ruminations on magic, the story fleshes out some details about Schmendrick’s identity, explaining that his birth name was in fact “that of an ancient hero, best remembered for slaying a many-headed sea monster” (13). At first Nikos rejects the boy’s self-identification instead as “Schmendrick,” insisting, “That is not a name,” but simply “a word, a very old one” (14). Schmendrick knows this etymology quite well, and provides some definitions: “The boy who is sent to do a man’s job” and “The person utterly out of his depth, far beyond his pitiful capabilities” (14). Yet he insists on the self-deprecating Yiddish borrowing, establishing his characteristic “self-contempt” early in life: at the age of 12, Schmendrick seems to know who he is, just as we do (14).

“Schmendrick Alone” more simply fills in the story behind a cryptic reference in *The Last Unicorn*: when attempting to free the unicorn from her cage at the carnival, Schmendrick alludes to having once before called up the threatening “gray shape” beyond his power to control (46). As such, the prequel story again follows the basic narrative pattern of the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” ultimately imparting another Le Guinian lesson about the exercise of power in words remembered from Nikos: “When you are as old as I, you will understand—perhaps—how to do certain things, and

understand as well why you must never do them" (171).[11] The fact that these Schmendrick stories so closely evoke the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" in depicting a younger wizard in over his head underscores the debt to the tradition that Beagle's novel itself shows—Schmendrick taps powers beyond him and lands himself in various kinds of trouble at several points in the original narrative—but above all allow Beagle, like Le Guin in her coming of age novel, to reflect on the symbolic meanings that might attach to magic, and the necessary steps to come in the wizard's magical and moral education.

Of the least interest as metafiction or metafantasy is that first novella "Two Hearts," which nevertheless retains considerable significance in providing the only direct continuation of the story of *The Last Unicorn*, what Beagle has described as the novel's "tailpiece or coda," and "quasi-epilogue" (*Mirror Kingdoms* 10). Even in this more or less straightforward sequel, Beagle has taken care to write a very different kind of narrative, filtering the action through the perspective of a child and setting it at the end of Lír's long life. "Two Hearts" narrates the foolhardy mission of Sooz, a nine-year old girl, to travel alone to request the aid of the aging King Lír in defeating a child-eating griffin that has been marauding near her village. She has the good fortune of encountering the wandering Schmendrick and Molly Grue and receiving their assistance, and readers witness a final reunion of Lír and the unicorn. Lír proves to be still a hero despite his senescence, giving his life a second time to defeat a supernatural foe; the unicorn remains the unicorn, as she must; and Schmendrick remains Schmendrick, as he must: "A dog. I nearly kill myself singing her to Lír, calling her as no one has *ever* called a unicorn—and she brings back, not him, but the dog. And here I'd always thought she had no sense of humor" (*The Way Home* 61). Molly, too, remains Molly, in that she understands what Schmendrick cannot: "She loved him too. That's why she let him go. Keep your voice down" (61). At the end of the story, Molly teaches Sooz a special tune to whistle only on her 17th birthday, promising that someone will come to her when she does so, "Maybe the greatest magician in the world, maybe only an old lady with a soft spot for valiant, impudent children" (63). In "Two Hearts," Beagle affirms the human characters rather than the immortal, aloof unicorn as central to his fantasy, and it is them that Sooz hopes that she will meet again, having no desire for a repeat visit by

the unicorn. She thinks to herself, “A unicorn is very nice, but they’re my friends” (63).

But neither Molly nor Schmendrick comes when Sooz whistles the tune, 8 years later for her and 18 years later in our world. The 2023 novella “Sooz” is aptly titled in that only Sooz herself carries over from “Two Hearts,” with none of the characters from *The Last Unicorn* making an appearance except in her own brief memories of them. There is certainly no unicorn to be seen, and yet in some ways this novella resembles *The Last Unicorn* more than anything else Beagle has written since. In terms of the texture of setting and character—and the first-person narration more characteristic of Beagle’s later works—the novella can feel more like the many stories set in the world of *The Innkeeper’s Song*.[12] And yet, like *The Last Unicorn*, the story turns out to center around a search for lost kin in which a character faces a choice between immortality and mortality, and its protagonist acquires unlikely companions along the way, one of whom seeks “Uncle Death,” just as Mommy Fortuna tells the unicorn, “You were out on the road hunting for your own death” (37), and Schmendrick literally searches for a cure to his own immortality. The unicorn herself remains physically absent, but the spirit of *The Last Unicorn* runs throughout the narrative.

Even though “Sooz” is not nearly as self-conscious a metafiction as the novel, there are certain such touches in the worldbuilding worthy of examination. The plot concerns a fairy abduction and a quest to rescue a long-lost sibling from the “Good Folk” or “Dreamies,” and once Sooz crosses the border into the dreamlike Fairyland, the constantly changing landscape takes on a quality of artifice bordering on the metafictive: “Sometimes I almost convince myself that every bit of it was set up, planned out for me, all for my benefit, like one of those hero plays that traveling troupes used to put on in the marketplace. But most often I still think they [the fairies] were making it up as they went along, day to day, moment by moment, the way children do” (108). While Sooz may not declare herself to exist within a fairytale as confidently as Schmendrick, she notes a river “twinkling beside us in proper fairy-tale style” (110), and continues to brave “whichever brand-new landscape the Dreamies had invented for us overnight” (111), on her return journey also observing some trees that ring especially false: “[T]he trunks, lovely as they were, had a strangely temporary air about them, as though traveling troupes had

propped them up for a village performance. As though they could be taken down at midnight, fast, for the next town" (170). But to what end does Beagle include such metafictional touches? In featuring a personification of Death, the novella also recalls Beagle's early short story "Come Lady Death," and could be seen to represent a coming full circle at last, a true "return" to some of his earliest fantasies that comments on fantasy itself: "Your way home is on the other side of the way you came" (180).

For Sooz comes to realize that "'Dreamie' doesn't only mean the ones who live there" but also "means *that place*, that child's imagining of a world where if you don't want something to stay *this* way or *that* way, you yourself can make it be different" (130, emphasis in original): Dreamie or Fairy functions in some respects as stand-in for fantasy itself, Tolkien's "Perilous Realm" in the language of "On Fairy-stories." As in many narratives about Fairyland, the novella also thematizes change versus stasis, and asks whether Fairy—and indeed fantasy—is the place of unending change it superficially appears to be, or a more duplicitous and static world of infinite repetition: "'Nothing changes,' I said. 'It all gets prettier and prettier, but it's still the same" (178). Beagle's vision for fantasy suggests a form always in pursuit of change but perhaps hampered by a tendency toward repetition, hence his own resistance for so long to imagining the further adventures of Schmendrick or the unicorn, of producing a new novel set in the same world year in and year out after the fashion of so many commercial fantasy franchises. Even if we may seek out fantasy for its comforts, the genre's capacity for change, Beagle suggests, is connected with its very ability to discomfort, trouble, prod our ease. Thus, early on in "Sooz," the author rather startlingly inflicts a gang rape on the former child protagonist of "Two Hearts," which had seen a sentimental return of familiar characters. In fact, the single key detail expanding on events of *The Last Unicorn* to be found in "Sooz" is a confirmation that Molly Grue's difficult life in the Greenwood also included sexual assault (98), although this is also arguably implied in the novel as well. We even see the return of the black road imagery from the 1962 draft of *The Last Unicorn* in an unlikely new context when Sooz recollects "those four men who had taught me the road, and who will always haunt my nights" (167). Here in this euphemistic phrase for sexual violence, "taught me the road," the road returns as an image of hardship and suffering, the sticky black tar that cannot be shaken off the unicorn's hooves. Yet in framing Fairyland's

dangers and warning of its siren call as he does in “Sooz,”, Beagle is not writing anti-fantasy that rejects the fantastic. A simple nursery rhyme, the epitome of a familiar fantasy narrative, proves instrumental in leading the characters home, and Sooz must follow its instructions exactly, rehearse the very formulae of fantasy, in order to unlock its secret: “A nursery rhyme isn’t ever a silly song at all. Sometimes it can be a charm, a map to lead us home” (206). In Sooz’s bittersweet homecoming from Fairyland—and as we have seen throughout these adaptations and extensions of *The Last Unicorn*—not only the sorrows of change but also its ultimate necessity emerge as a grand theme. The novella concludes with a reflection on how “you can’t forget the ones who change you always,” and “[w]ho claim you forever” (214): that for Beagle is the true power of a fairy story, to change us and claim us.

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Footnotes

1 Regrettably, it is difficult to comment much on the multiple stage adaptations of the novel, as records of these productions are especially ephemeral. But they include, among others, a 1988 dance/theater production at the Intiman Theater in Seattle, adapted by Beagle, choreographed by Kent Stowell, and directed by Elizabeth Huddle; as well as a 2009 Chicago production by the Promethean Theatre Ensemble written and directed by Ed Rutherford and performed at the City Lit Theater. As early as 1995, Beagle could already gesture to "half a dozen" dramatizations, in addition to the 14 languages into which the novel had already been translated by that point (*Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn* xi).

2 In his afterword to *The Lost Journey*, the self-deprecating Beagles writes, "What, exactly, is a lilac wood … and for God's sake, what did I have in mind? I didn't know. I never do" (131).

3 Without the Red Bull as enemy and destination to lend it a more direct narrative purpose, the butterfly conversation veers off into frivolity, and ends with a series of nonsense directions (33–34).

4 Compare Bilbo's homecoming recitation from the final chapter of *The Hobbit*, which so impresses Gandalf—"You are not the hobbit that you were"—with lines such as "*Roads go ever ever on / Under cloud and under star, / Yet feet that wandering have gone / Turn at last to home afar*" (313).

5 Brian Rosebury offers an early gloss on the meaning of the Road for Bilbo and Tolkien: "The homespun symbolism is transparent enough, and indeed Bilbo's speech makes it virtually explicit: the Road stands for life, or rather for its possibilities, indeed probabilities, of adventure, commitment, and danger; for the fear of losing oneself, and the hope of homecoming" (30).

6 As discussed in Chap. 2, Raymond Olderman interprets the Red Bull as "the power that usurps man's control of his own life" (227); "that unseen force with its power vested nowhere that haunts us from behind the facts of our daily life" (228); and "the waste land maker" (228). These descriptions also—and perhaps more closely—fit the black road leading to the gray city as Beagle portrays them in the early draft.

7 Jeff Ulin describes the new video market of the 1980s and 1990s as "nothing short of a cash flow godsend to studios and producers" (174), observing that "[t]he ultimate accelerant for the sell through market were kids videos, in particular the emergence of Disney as a dominating force" (173). Regarding unicorns, even Paul Fussell's 1983 provocation *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* notes the early 1980s unicorn trend with perplexity: "As one catalog announces,

‘Unicorns are all the rage these days.’ I’ve spent six months trying to find out exactly why, and I’m finally stumped” (123).

8 On the resolution of the legal issues, see Beagle’s 2021 press release via PRNewswire, “‘The Last Unicorn’ Returns Home,” or Elizabeth A. Harris’s 2022 *New York Times* writeup. Some of Beagle’s writings that had been published only through Conlan Press remain inaccessible at present, including, for example, the 2015 digital-only essay collection *Sméagol, Déagol, and Beagle: Essays from the Headwaters of My Voice*. Writing in the introduction to his collection *Mirror Kingdoms* before their falling out, Beagle had credited Cochran with conceiving of and inspiring many of his twenty-first-century projects, especially those connected with *The Last Unicorn*, “just as he is responsible, in one way or another, for the existence of all the stories that followed [on ‘Two Hearts’]” (10).

9 The film did not receive its first DVD release until 2004, around the time of DVD format’s peak market share; see the data referred to in Whitten, “The Death of the DVD.”

10 Beagle seems to be channeling Le Guin again elsewhere in the story when he writes that “spells and enchantments derive a great deal of their power from well-placed silences” (18). In the same conversation in *A Wizard of Earthsea* about the word “meat-pie,” we also hear Ged, the titular wizard, discourse on silence: “For a word to be spoken […] there must be silence. Before and after” (112).

11 *A Wizard of Earthsea* emphasizes throughout—although to the young Ged’s initial dismay—that the wise know when not to use their power: “the true wizard uses such spells only at need, since to summon up such earthly forces is to change the earth of which they are a part” (41).

12 Shortly after the publication of *The Innkeeper’s Song*, John Clute was quick to identify the newer novel as set in the same universe as *The Last Unicorn* based on references in both to a great wizard named Nikos, but Beagle’s many more recent writings assigned to each respective world make it clear that the two settings should be understood as distinct; Clute does admit that such a relationship is “identifiable only by inference” (94–95). More recently, however, David Stevens has entertained the idea of a more direct connection between the narrative worlds: “Perhaps it is only a coincidence that the wizard has green eyes, as did Schmendrick, and perhaps it is a further coincidence that the wizard traveled around with a woman for a long time, as Schmendrick did with Molly Grue. Perhaps it is a coincidence that both Lal’s friend and Schmendrick are described as the greatest magician who ever lived. Or perhaps it is not” (*Beyond Horatio’s Philosophy* 149).

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6. Conclusion: Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn

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Abstract
Beagle's story of the unicorn searching for her lost kindred has spread across the world in a variety of forms, and continues to be read in new ways by new generations. Its image of the unicorn has become a modern myth in its own right, and the novel remains a resonant commentary on the genre that it helped to create.

Keywords Adaptation – Queer coding – Metafantasy

Beagle's novel has been translated into numerous languages, sold millions of copies, and appeared reimagined in all manner of audiovisual adaptations. It has resonated with audiences around the world in ways Beagle could never have anticipated when he first began to compose it in the Cheshire hills in 1962. For instance, Nazli Artemia has written a personal reflection pondering the reach of the 1982 animated film as far abroad as her hometown of Urmia, Iran, during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s: after having seen a fragment of the film in Persian in a movie theater that was interrupted by an air-raid siren, she then watched a further fragment on a TV powered by a car battery, only for that viewing, too, to be interrupted by the realities of the war. In the novel, Schmendrick defines the

unicorn herself as “a story with no ending” (276), but for Artemia the story could reach no ending for very specific reasons, the tale and her childhood fragmented by conflict. Likewise, H. A. Clarke’s 2020 personal essay “Queer Visibility & Coding in *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle” attests to the novel’s success in continuing to find new audiences in the twenty-first century, and audiences who may read it in new ways he could not have imagined. (“A man and a woman,” says Haggard watching the arrival of the group, “I am not certain of the third” [155]). Clarke’s essay teases out various potential queer dimensions of narrative, traces how heteronormative codes become imposed on Amalthea as a human woman, and excavates desire and its frustrations in the characters’ respective predicaments: “Thank you, Peter Beagle, for the yearning” (Clarke). If the novel’s success has overshadowed the author’s other works, that success is poised to continue into the indefinite future.

For all of the novel’s earnestness about true magic and the beauty of unicorns, it remains notable for its extensive use of humor and metafiction, and one can speak of it as a product of, a contribution to, or a reaction against both 1960s American counterculture and the new metafictional experiments of the decade. In other words, it is a novel very much of its time even as it occupies a unique place in the history of fantasy, farsighted in its incisive critiques of the fantasy formula that would come to dominate the genre, and presenting challenges for the historiography of fantasy’s development; Adam Roberts has mused on the difficulty of accounting “for Beagle’s very American (I think) Fantasy novel” in a conventional history of fantasy (“Jewish Fantasy”). Beagle’s own larger career showed him taking a longer route to genre fantasy from the literary mainstream, even as his work helped shape genre fantasy. It is fitting that a novel that so thematizes time should complicate our sense of linear history. The hunters in the novel’s first chapter memorably debate about the appropriateness of unicorns in various times: “‘Would you call this age a good one for unicorns?’ ‘No, but I wonder if any man before us ever thought his time a good time for unicorns’” (5). In *The California Feeling*, Beagle contrasts a sense of barely missed utopia in 1960s California with “New York City, where you grow up knowing that there never was a golden time, that there was nothing to be late for” (11), a set of contrary views of time that might be seen to recapitulate the hunter’s dialogic exchange: the dream, the ideal, is lost forever and also always in reach.

In the 1962 draft of *The Last Unicorn*, the dragon accusatorily asks the unicorn, “Don’t you know what’s happening in the world?” (6). Psychologically and environmentally destructive modernity has chased away all enchantment and sense of wonder in the real, banishing the creatures of myth and legend: “It’s a bad time for dragons. But it’s no time at all for unicorns” (13). If Beagle’s anti-modern ecological critique proves more explicit in the 1962 draft, it remains implicit throughout the published text of *The Last Unicorn* and undergirds much of the metafictional turns away from formulaic fantasy to the world of the reader. The dragon’s sense of urgency about the world outside the unicorn’s wood reflects an author’s anxieties about using fantasy—and not merely fantasy, but the most self-reflexive, seemingly inward-looking metafantasy—to address the real world in times of global crisis, but the novel’s quest of recovery through story itself becomes an answer to help quiet such anxieties. As Beagle writes in an unassuming book review, “Myths bite deeper than headlines, live longer, and mean more than they seem to mean” (“John Barth” 131). In *The Last Unicorn*, he has succeeded in forging a new and enduring myth out of both winking comic metafiction and the traditional fragments of narrative circulating in what Tolkien refers to as the “Cauldron of Story” (“On Fairy-stories” 44), one that seeks to bite deeper than fleeting headlines, endure longer, and mean more than it seems to mean.

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